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RANCH ROMANCES

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION
FIRST NOVEMBER NUMBER

FEATURING

THE PROUD ONE
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

DECISION AT THREE MILE
by Giff Cheshire

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31st Year
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RANCH ROMANCES

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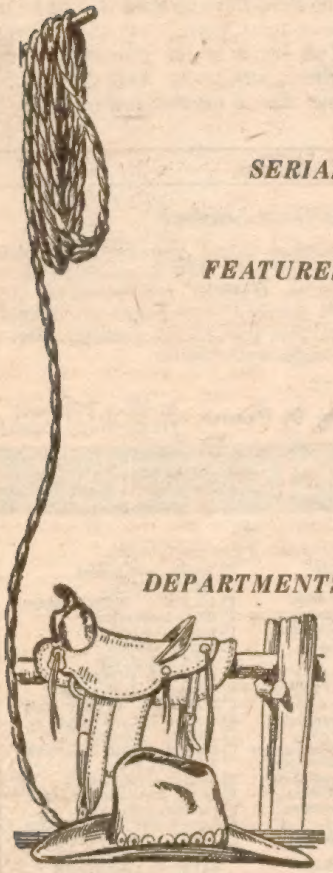

HELEN TONO
Editor

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Bouncy Boxer

Dear Editor:

I would greatly appreciate it if you would include me in your RANCH ROMANCES Pen Pal column. I am 24 years old, six feet tall, and a boxer by profession. I would welcome some pen pals of the opposite sex.

FRANK ISAIAH

929 North Robberson
Springfield, Missouri

Record Collector

Dear Editor:

I am 20 years old, 5'5" tall, and have brown hair and eyes. I like dancing, collecting records, and most sports. I would like to hear from people of all ages, and would especially like to hear from servicemen. I will do my best to answer all letters.

DARLENE CAROTHERS

128 So. Inex Street
Hemet, California

Anxious

Dear Editor:

I hope there is room in your Air Mail column for me. I am 15 years old and have brown hair and gray eyes. I like horseback riding, fishing and hunting. I will be glad to get letters from boys or girls between the ages of 14 and 16.

DICK ATKINS

c/o H. G. Franklin
Route 1
Onalaska, Washington

Hard Worker

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl as I go to work at eight in the morning and get home late at night, so that I don't have anyone to talk to or write to. I am 5'2" tall and have black hair and eyes. I like to dance most of all, but I also like sports. So please let me hear from all of you.

L. FONG

8 St. James Street
Montego Bay,
Jamaica B.W.I.

First Try

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting into your Air Mail column. I am 17 years old, am 5'9" tall and weigh 133 lbs. I have brown hair and eyes. I promise to answer all girls from 15 to 20 years old.

DENNIS McDONALD

R.R.1
Forestville, Wisconsin

Baseball Fan

Dear Editor:

I would like to have my name in "Our Air Mail." I am 17 years old, have brown hair and eyes, am 5'2" tall, and weigh 111 lbs. I like most sports, especially baseball. My pastimes are collecting dolls, statues of dogs and horses, and writing letters. I will answer all letters that I receive.

KATHY McCARTHY

Box 262
Dickinson, North Dakota

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Five of a Kind

Dear Editor:

There are five of us in one tent who would like to correspond with girls who come from the following states: West Virginia, California, Alabama, New Jersey, and Michigan. Our ages are 19 and 20 and our heights range from 5'10" to 6'3½". Right now we are stationed in Japan.

CPL. BAILEY
PFC. FERNANDEZ
PFC. GREEN
PFC. RISHKO
PFC. REYNOLDS

Regt. H & S Btry
12 Mar. 3 Mar. Div. F.M.F
c/o F.P.O. San Francisco
California

Marine in Japan

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to write to some nice girls. I am a lonely Marine who's been in Japan for almost a year now. I would like to write to girls between the ages of 19 and 25 years. I am 23 years old, am 5' 9" tall and have brown hair and eyes. I like all popular music and also all sports. So come on, all you lovely girls, drop me a line.

CPL. RONALD G. HUNTER 1376786

Regt H-S 12th Marines
3d Mar. Div. FMF, c/o FPO
San Francisco, California

Two Lost Lassies

Dear Editor:

We're two lonely girls lost in the midst of Washington. We'd love to have some pen pals. We'd like to hear from anyone—men, women or children. Betty is 21 years old, 5' 3" tall, with brown eyes and blond hair. Dolores is 21 years old, 5' 5½" tall, with brown hair and green eyes.

DOLORES FROEMBGEN
BETTY CLEVELAND

Route #2
Snohomish, Washington

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TRAIL DUST

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AN ENID, Okla., wife waited outside the polling booth till her husband finished marking his ballot, left the booth, took off his glasses and handed them to her. Putting the glasses on, the wife in turn went into the booth to cast her vote.

HE'S not saying what he intends to do with it, but a Los Alamos, N. Mex., policeman was high bidder in an auction to sell a government surplus jail.

IT WAS a rough ride for a North Hollywood, Calif., cab driver when his fare threatened to shoot himself and the cabbie. The driver managed to disarm the customer, and called over a motorcycle policeman—who tripped over his cycle and broke his foot. Just before another officer made the arrest, the customer turned to the cabbie and paid his fare—35 cents.

A BEULAH, Wyo., politician got carried away by the momentum of his campaign, and had to be tipped off that he had crossed the state line and was soliciting votes in South Dakota.

SCREAMING for help when a man snatched her purse, a Portland, Ore., woman attracted the attention of a passing motorist, who stopped, picked up the thief, and drove off.

TWO young architecture students in Vancouver, B.C., couldn't understand why they were so rudely told to move on when they tried to take measurements of a new bank building for a school project. They didn't know that the bank had been plagued by eight robberies in the five weeks it was in operation.

"HERE is $5 for the dent I put in your fender," read the note a Salt Lake City, Utah, policeman found pinned to the steering wheel of his car. The officer is still searching for the honest driver—because he's had the dented fender for weeks.

WHEN a woman who couldn't write appeared at a Denver, Colo., election bureau to register her vote, officials decided she could do so by making an "X." Then she wanted to register her husband; so she was allowed to sign "X" by "X."

BURGLARS who looted a Toppenish, Wash., store made a "clean" getaway. They stole—among other things—three pairs of new socks, and left three pairs of dirty socks near the back door.

POLICE in Joliet, Ill., were stumped only for a minute when they received a report that a woman had been bitten by a rooster. Then a quick-thinking cop took out the regular police form, scratched out "dog" and substituted "rooster."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

APACHE AMBUSH

Rough-and-tumble action is easy for the cast of Columbia's new movie . . . all the actors are veterans of the real or the reel West

EVERY SO OFTEN a Western comes along that even the most demanding fans agree is pretty special. Sometimes it's an off-beat plot that keeps the picture from falling into the standard horse-opera formula.

Sometimes a Western becomes "different" because it has the kind of a cast that makes you wonder if you are looking at actors or the real thing. Sometimes it's both, as it is in *Apache Ambush,* Columbia's new release.

The story has enough incidents of raiding Indians and stampeding cattle to keep the budding Davy Crockett's wide-eyed. But there's more to *Apache Ambush* than blood and thunder.

The action takes place in Texas soon after the Civil War, during the time when Mexican bandits were using renegade Confederate soldiers for their purposes. They took advantage of the Confederates' hate for the North to enlist their aid in the plan to win back the New Mexico and California Territories for Mexico.

Passions are running high when a wagon train arrives in the seething town of San Arturo, sent by President Lincoln to drive Texas cattle north to relieve a critical food shortage.

The drivers immediately achieve some sort of record for unpopularity. The Confederates hate Northerners, the Apaches hate cattle drivers, and the Mexicans hate everybody. To confuse matters further, a load of illicit repeater rifles turns up in the wagon, which causes all sorts of trouble.

As to how it all ends, there'll be only two things of which you, the movie audience, will be certain. Texas will remain with us (it does —as we know from our history books) and the hero will get the girl.

Although there are few big names in the cast of *Apache Ambush,* it is nevertheless

an extra-special group of performers. Practically everybody in the picture is either a veteran Western actor or a real cowboy.

Bill Williams heads the list of hard-riding actors. Bill has made more Westerns than he can count, as well as starring as Kit Carson on television for long enough to become the idol of millions of junior cowpokes. Now Bill isn't really happy making a picture unless it is a Western.

"Westerns are our own American version of knights, musketeers and pirates," Bill says, "and everybody loves 'em, including me."

Other roles in *Apache Ambush* are played by Ray "Crash" Corrigan, Ray Teal, and Tex Ritter—all actors who have each starred in more than a hundred Westerns in their day. Their experience goes way back to the days when making a Western was a rugged job for rugged men.

Stunt men and doubles were unheard of then, which meant that the actors took their own falls and fought their own fights. But that didn't mean that the action was any less violent. Almost every one of the veterans in the cast has some kind of a scar to remember the good old days by.

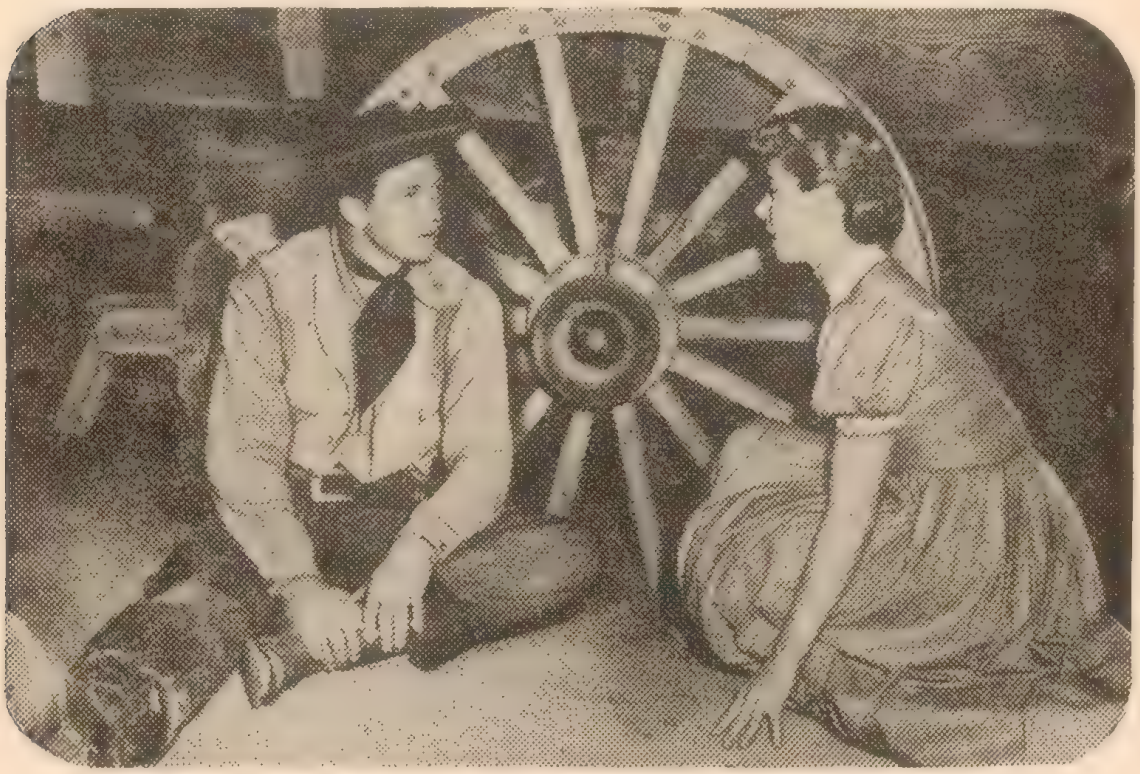
It's a big cast, all right. The average height of the actors is over six feet, and the average weight a hefty 186 pounds. "What a football team we'd make!" Bill was heard to remark.

Adelle August, who plays the feminine lead, is one of the few newcomers to Westerns among the many hardened veterans. Adelle had led a pretty quiet life of winning beauty contests and such until *Apache Ambush* came along. She says she hasn't quite recovered yet.

"My other pictures didn't prepare me for making a Western," Adelle said. "I was always sure that somebody was really going to get hurt in one of those terrible fights.

"And I still have my doubts that all those bullets whizzing around were honestly blanks. But I'll have to admit that *Apache Ambush* was certainly an exciting picture to make."

And I can add that it is every bit as exciting to watch.



Bill Williams's injured ankle elicits Adelle August's sympathy

JAMES DEAN
All Kinds of Talent

EVER SINCE James Dean hit Hollywood, studio executives at Warners have been practically purring with contentment. And why not? Jimmy was famous even before *East of Eden,* his first picture, was released. And that makes him a very valuable young man to have around indeed.

But Jimmy's rise to stardom wasn't really as meteoric as most people think. Like most success stories, his involved a lot of hard work, and even a period of not so steady eating.

It all started back in Indiana, when Jimmy won a contest as the best high school actor in the state. He was a farm boy then, but in between feeding the chickens and milking the cows, he found time to win so many prizes for so many different things that no one could be sure just what career he would finally choose.

His aunt and uncle, whom he was living with, were sure he would become a pro basketball player, when he was named the school's top athlete. When he won the art department prize, his friends saw a future as an artist for him. His father was sure that his talented son would make a top-flight lawyer.

As for the object of all this guesswork, Jimmy just wasn't sure. He quickly eliminated everything but the theatre and law, and went off to California and U.C.L.A. to make up his mind.

After juggling pre-law and dramatic courses around for a couple of years, the decision was made. Jimmy got down to business of becoming a professional actor.

Life had been pretty easy till then, but the easy days were over for a while when Jimmy hopped a bus for New York. Pounding the pavements is no fun no matter how you look at it, but for a farm boy who had been used to three squares a day, the big city was downright frightening. So frightening, in fact, that he spent most of his time and money in movie theatres.

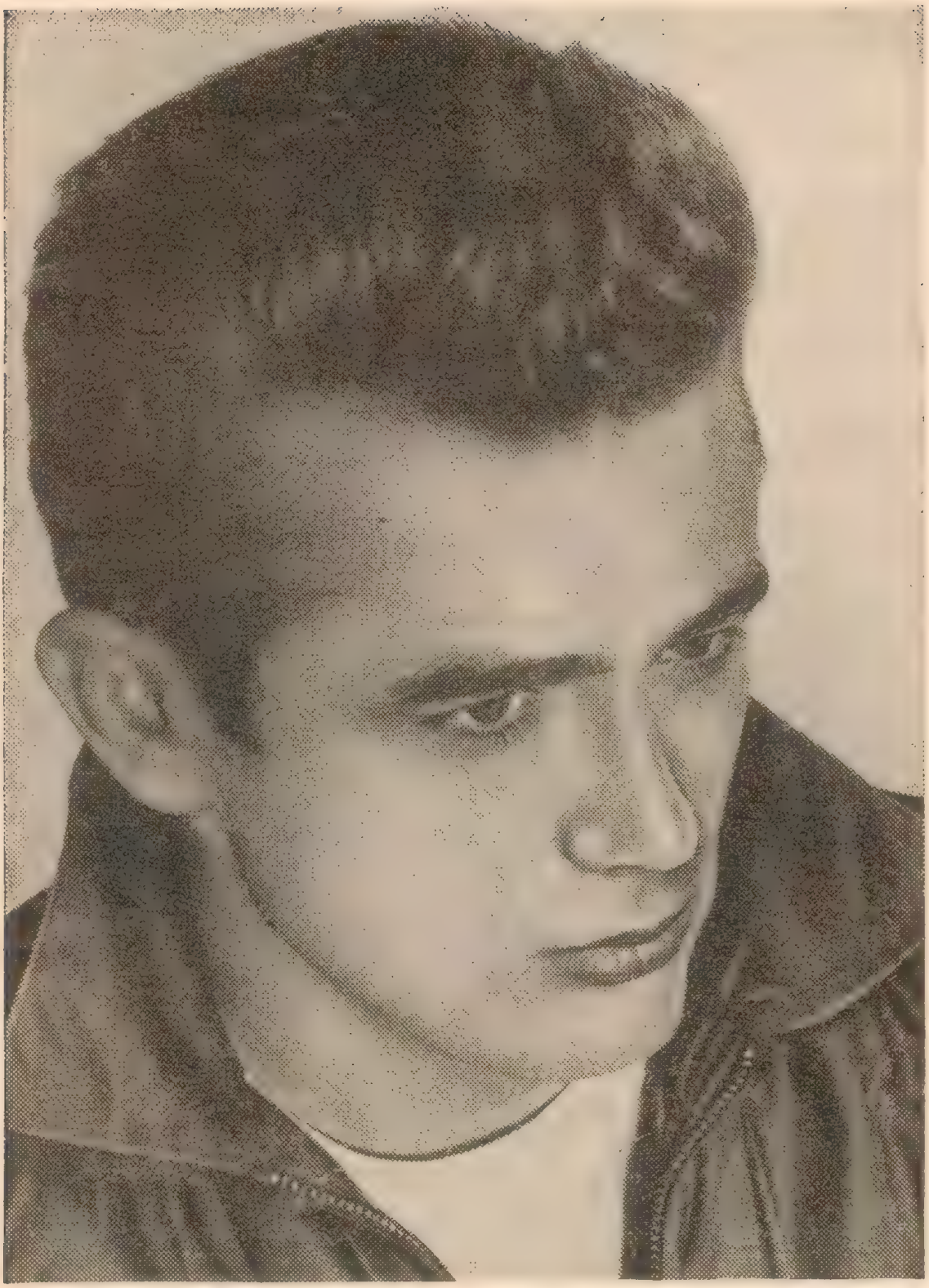
But that didn't get him anything much but a bad case of eye-strain, and a flat wallet. So he got up his courage and went job hunting in earnest. The result was a year of television extra work—just enough of it to keep from getting too hungry.

Jimmy's big break came when he took a job as a sailor on a sloop. Although he knew nothing about sailing, a little fast talking convinced the owner that he practically grew up on the ocean. The reason for all this was that the owner of the sloop had important theatrical connections, and Jimmy wasn't too happy at his snail-paced progress as an actor. The subterfuge worked like a charm. By the time the sloop had cruised up and down the Atlantic coast a few times, Jimmy had an appointment with a Broadway producer, and it was clear sailing from then on.

Jimmy is currently hard at work on *Giant,* a saga of a modern Texas family, based on Edna Ferber's best-selling novel. It's the kind of a role that most actors would feel pretty lucky to get after about twenty years of experience. But Jimmy more than makes up in talent what he lacks in years.

It seems to be a truism that people who work hard play just as hard. Jimmy does both, and when it comes to recreation, he's nearly violent. If he isn't careening around on his motorcycle, he is apt to be out racing his sports car at breakneck speeds.

Jimmy has come a long way from that farm in Indiana, and he's not through yet. At the rate he's going now, some people are betting that he'll be producing his own pictures by the time he's twenty-five.



Warner Bros

Jimmy's rise to stardom wasn't quite as fast as most people think

The Proud One

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

EX-RANGER CONWAY had trouble enough staying alive in the outlaws' hideout . . . without protecting a woman whose secret sealed her doom

HORSESHOE BASIN was about as pretty a place, in a wild and rugged sort of way, as a man could find anywhere. It was high in the Santa Margarita Mountains, walled in on three sides by steep slopes that were crisscrossed by big quartz veins. The other side had a narrow gap through which you could see a hundred miles of desert country far below.

There was water in the Basin, and a lot of shady live-oak trees. Birds sang from dawn till dark. The miners who once had been here had left a lot of stone shacks; so, if you wanted, you picked yourself one that wasn't occupied, cleared out the pack rats' nests, and moved in.

You might not leave again, though. That depended on

who you were. The outlaws who made this their refuge made their own rules, and if they got the notion that you might be a lawman, you were dead. Ed Conway was thinking about that, wondering if he hadn't made a bad mistake in coming here, on the morning when the woman rode into the Basin.

Conway was sitting in the sunshine at the front of his shack. He was a six-footer, spare in build and tougher looking than a man should be at twenty-eight, with a wry discontent touching his face. Things had gone badly for him about a month ago, below the Mexican line, and that had been in a venture of his own choosing. When you struck out to be your own man any mistakes that you made struck directly at you, and nobody else. They pulled you down fast.

He saw Will Garmish's face, slyly watching him from the glassless window of the shack across the wash. And he tightened up a little, inside, without permitting it to show on the surface. Garmish had been doing too much of that watching, lately. The man must suspect something, Conway thought.

Garmish was part Indian. He had been around a long time, and now he was a broken-down old outlaw with nothing much to do except brood about past times and hash over the doings of younger men with a sort of bitter envy. He would have a long memory, and at some time or other he might have heard of a Texas Ranger named Conway. If he succeeded in remembering that, it would be too bad.

Garmish came out of his shack after a time and crossed the wash. He was hatless, and his coarse black hair was hanging over ears and collar. His face was gouged by a pattern of lines that went deep into dark, leathery flesh and gave him a sardonic look. His eyes had a crafty, superior expression in them. He was filthy; when he sat down without being asked, Conway's nostrils tightened against the gamy Indian smell of him.

But Conway said, "Morning, Will."

The old man grunted and said, "Lew Strang got in last night." His sidelong glance watched for Conway's reaction to that.

Conway shrugged, not saying anything. He had heard that Lew Strang was the king of the camp, but the man hadn't been around during the two weeks Conway had been here. Now it would be up to Conway to convince Strang that he had come here to escape the law.

It was funny, in a twisted sort of way. In most places a man was safe just so long as he was considered to be reasonably honest. Here you had to be on the dodge, like the rest of them, or you were a hazard to their safety.

If Garmish hoped to detect some sign of worry in Ed Conway, he was disappointed. Finally he said, "Lew fetched me some beans, and coal oil for my lamp. I sat up till nearly morning, reading that Shakespeare book I have."

"I saw your light."

Reading, Conway wondered, or watching me? It must be a hell of a way for an old man to live, scraping along on the charity of outlaws. But a man like Garmish wouldn't have any folks who would own up to relationship with him. He was on the downhill end of a misspent life, and seemed bitterly aware of that.

"I told Lew about you," Garmish said slyly. "He wants to see you. He's never been down in Mexico and figures you might be able to put him next to something good down there."

That was a lie. Strang had spent a lot of time in Mexico, as the fat file under his name in the El Paso office of the Rangers showed. They were setting Conway up, giving him a chance to tell some lies about his trouble below the border. Garmish might even get a bottle of whisky for his part in tripping Ed Conway.

Conway's expression didn't change, but he berated himself inwardly. He had been a reckless fool in coming to this place. But it had seemed the only thing to do at the time. He had been down there on the desert, half crazy with fever and pain, without water and without money. He looked tough enough to be accepted in Horseshoe Basin, where he could rest up and recover from the flesh wound in his thigh.

Once he was on his feet again he might be able to follow one of the outlaws away from here and take him. A thousand dollars

or so of reward money would give Ed Conway a fresh start—that is, if he had gone low enough to turn bounty hunter. He had taken the gamble, and now it might get him killed if he weren't careful.

They wouldn't catch him in any lie about what had happened down in Mexico. The truth about that was good enough; he had been lucky to get out of the country alive. The real danger was that somebody would remember something farther back. Even an ex-Ranger was poison here.

A man could scare himself with this kind of thinking. Conway looked toward the gap in the hills and wondered if he could stall off the questioning until dark and then steal a horse and make a run for it. And then he saw the woman.

SHE was riding through the gap and into the Basin itself, followed by a big-hatted Mexican who led two pack mules. She seemed young and she was rather small in build, wearing a divided riding skirt and a little coat that was tailored like a man's. Garmish saw her too. He made a startled grunt and got up.

Conway kept his eyes on her as she came steadily up the trail, which followed the other side of the wash and swung past Garmish's shack. A woman wasn't any particular oddity in the Basin, since several of the hardcases had female friends living with them. But this one didn't seem to be the sort that belonged here. She held her slim body very straight, shoulders back, head high. She looked about her with what seemed a wary defiance.

She had a mosquito net pulled over her mannish hat and tied about her neck. That was a wise precaution, since the insects were bad in these Arizona mountains at this time of year. It kept Conway from getting a good look at her face, though, even when she came opposite him.

She seemed to stiffen in her saddle then, and she turned to look squarely at Ed Conway. It was a long, searching, startled scrutiny. Then, as if regaining a control of herself that momentarily had slipped, she looked straight ahead once more and gigged her horse, and passed out of sight behind some trees.

Garmish gave Conway one of his sidelong looks. "Know her?"

"Never saw her before, Will.'

"She seemed to know you."

"She just gave me the once-over. They all do that. You must have forgotten, old man, how it was when you were young."

That was pretty lame. It didn't seem to convince Garmish. The woman, Conway was thinking, was a fool. She must know what this place was. The Mexican must be her guide, but he was little and old and he had huddled in his saddle in a way that said he was terrified. He must surely have warned her about what she was getting into.

"They're going on up to the well," Garmish said.

"Yeah. Those canteens bounced around like they were empty." Conway stretched out his right leg to ease its aching. The wound had gotten to that itchy stage now, which meant it was coming along.

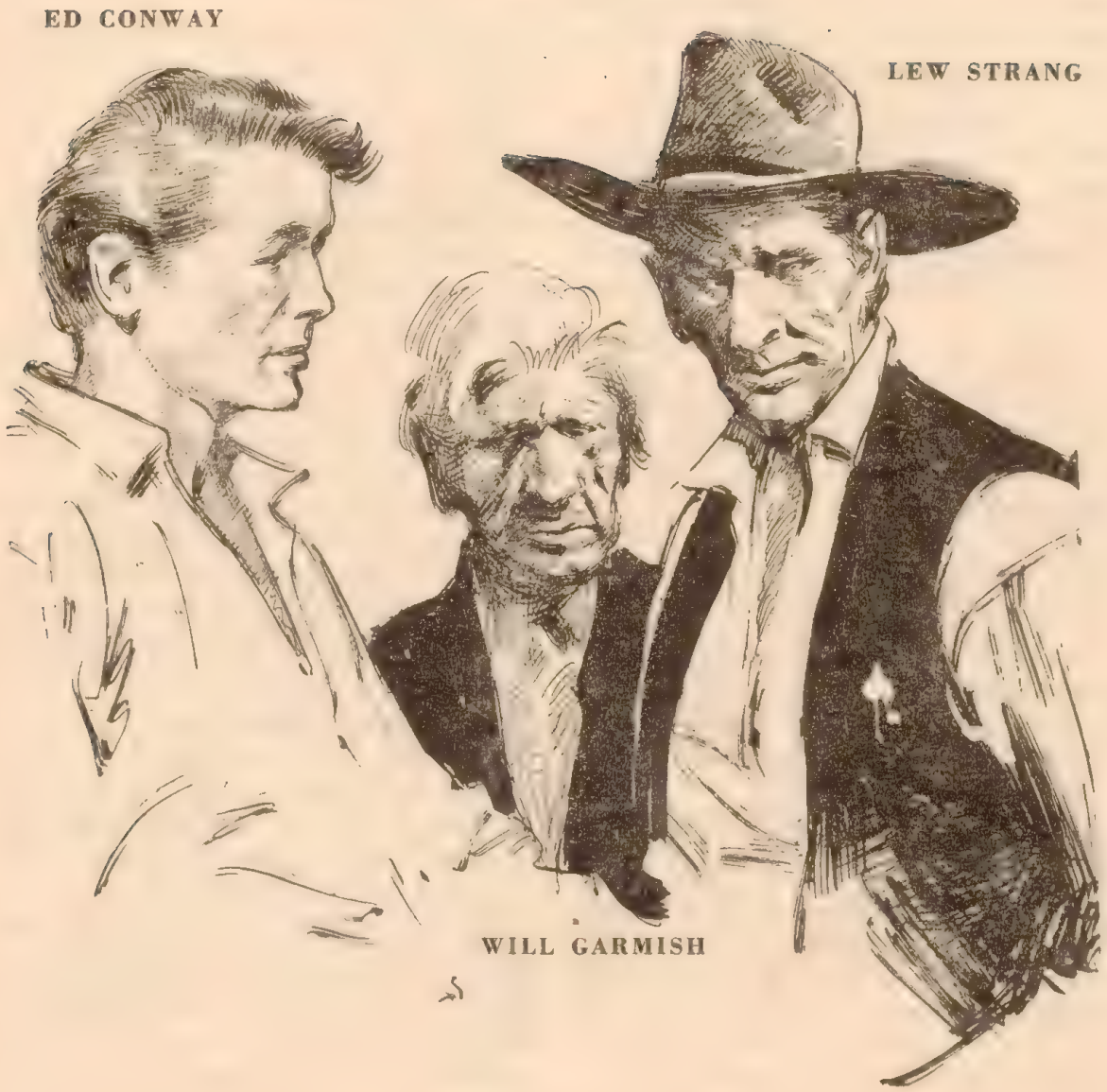
"I'm going up to the well and see the fun," Garmish said. "You stay here."

That had sounded like an order. Conway watched the old man cross the wash and disappear among the trees, and scowled at the dark stir of his own thinking.

He didn't remember any woman like that one, small-boned and proudly reserved- in manner. There had been one in Silver City who'd been small— No, that one had been a blonde, and the brassy sort at that.

This one had been startled by Conway's presence here. But maybe both he and Garmish had read the wrong meaning into her glance. Maybe she had simply divined, by some intuition, that Conway didn't belong here. She might have figured that he was a man who might help her, and it was possible that she had been trying to ask him to do just that.

He swore under his breath. She had come here of her own free will and she'd have to take her chances. Conway had troubles of his own, and would only bring them to a head by trying to help a fool woman trespassing in this place of rough and lusty men who took what they wanted.



That decision lasted abotu five minutes. Then Conway got to his feet and limped along the bottom of the wash, fairly well concealed as he went toward the upper end of the Basin. You're getting to be a bigger fool all the time, he told himself as he went.

He passed a woman who had spilled a bucket of water into a depression in the bottom of the wash and was rubbing clothes against the rock. She must have been real fancy once. She wasn't very old but now she was down to this, a meager existence in a mountain aerie. She gave Conway a smeary look of invitation as he passed, but she didn't say anything.

He went along more swiftly. The wash deepened and made a sharp bend near the wooden building that had been a store and postoffice in the days of the mining boom. Lew Strang and some of the others lived in it now, Garmish had said.

From the bend of the wash Conway could see the well, which was near one corner of the store's porch. The slim girl was there,

sitting on her horse while the Mexican pulled up buckets hastily from the well and, having filled their canteens, started watering their animals.

Garmish was over there beyond her, slouched in the shade of a big tree with a smirking expression on his face. Some other men had come out on the porch and were talking to the woman. Conway moved to a slightly different position so that he could see them without leaving the partial concealment of the deep wash.

The woman was saying, "We got lost, as I've told you. Finally we ran out of water, and Julio thought we could get some here. And so—" She made a little shrug, as if expecting her explanation to be accepted in the casual way it was made.

The men on the porch weren't accepting it. Any stranger was a hazard to them. There were five of them on the porch, all eyeing her with suspicion that was mixed with something else. They hadn't seen a woman like this one in a long time, and they were making the most of it.

ONE was a big man of about thirty-five, with yellow hair and sideburns and a long, coarsely handsome face. He had a heavy-lidded look, as if he had been suddenly aroused from sleep. He said, "Where was it you were going, ma'am?"

"Down to the Mexican line. My husband is working there and I came out from the East to join him. I left the train at Benson, where Julio had been sent to meet me."

The big man made a grin. "You've had a long ride, ma'am. Better light down and rest awhile. My name is Strang, Lew Strang, and these boys here are all good friends of mine."

"Thank you, no, Mr. Strang. Julio and I have lost so much time that we must hurry on. We are due at my husband's camp several days ago."

Strang scowled. He was a chesty sort, with shirtsleeves rolled up on muscular, hairy arms. He had maintained a deceptive politeness thus far, but now it was wearing thin. His eyes took on a hooded, speculative look.

He was seeing a mighty attractive young woman, one whose small body was graced by mature roundness that not even her manish attire could conceal. Her face had a cameo quality, when seen through that mosquito net. Her hair was dark, with reddish highlights in it.

And although Strang's reactions seemed to be slowed by the sleep that still lingered in him, he looked her over boldly and then asked, "Where is your husband, ma'am?"

"On the international boundary, as I've told you."

She was trying to be coolly aloof, but there was tension in her. She was scared, Ed Conway thought. She knew what this place was. Then why in hell had she come here? Neither she nor the Mexican—nor their animals, for that matter—looked as if they had suffered from lack of water.

"Just what is your husband doing down there?" Strang asked.

She took a deep breath. "He has charge of a government crew that is surveying the line, Mr. Strang."

There was a silence. Strang blinked and turned his pale eyes to look at the men who were with him on the porch. They were an assorted lot, one nearly as old as Garmish, one of about Conway's age and a couple of kids who had a wild, unsteady look about them.

Conway knew what was going on in their heads. This was Arizona Territory, not Texas, and the law over here was weak as yet. They were fairly safe up here; their confidence in that was revealed by the fact that they didn't even keep a guard at the gap. But there was one thing they feared, and that was the federal government. Maybe the woman had banked on that.

Strang put his hands on the porch rail. "Well, now ma'am, much as we'd like to have your company for awhile, we sure wouldn't want to delay a lady trying to reach her husband. That right, boys?' He made a sudden laugh that echoed raucously in the Basin. The others smirked.

The Mexican mounted up hastily and gigged his horse. The woman swung her mount to follow him and then looked back, giving Strang a brief smile through her mosquito netting.

"Thank you for the water," she said as she started off.

Will Garmish was waiting at Conway's shack when the ex-Ranger returned. Conway had moved along slowly, favoring his leg. He didn't like the way Garmish was looking at him now.

"Thought I told you to stay here,' Garmish said.

"That's right, you did. But I don't take orders from any man, friend. I eased up there to see the fun, but there wasn't any."

"That'll come later.' Garmish was gloating over something. "I didn't see you up there, though."

"No, you didn't. I was in the wash, not aiming to be seen."

Conway listened for the sound of horses

coming down the Basin, but didn't hear any. The woman had gotten out safely and no one was following her. He wondered if she realized how lucky she had been.

Garmish settled down on the ground, shifting his bony back until he found a fairly comfortable position against the rock wall. "Now that Lew's waked up, he'll be coming down here pretty soon."

Conway sat down, not looking at the old man. For one who had been in this place nearly two weeks, he was thinking, he had been slow to tumble to the fact that there was a guard here after all.

During the first week Conway had been mighty sick. And later, as the swelling gradually left his wound and he hobbled about to limber up his leg, nobody had bothered him. They hadn't even taken his gun from him, and that had lulled him into a feeling of security.

Garmish had watched him, though, without seeming to do so. Garmish's shack was just across the wash, and every time Conway had stepped outside Garmish had been there, watching. These two shacks were the ones closest to the gap, so Garmish must be the outlaw's guard.

Lew Strang came down along the opposite side of the wash about an hour later, crossed over, and stopped in front of Conway. There was no meaningless formality of greeting. He got right down to business.

"Will tells me you were in bad shape when you got here, Conway," Strang said.

"That's right, I was.'

"Had some trouble down in Mexico, eh?"

Conway only nodded.

"Sparing with words, aren't you? Conway—that's a name I've heard comewhere before."

"It's a fairly common one, friend." Conway was thinking that he should have given some name that wasn't his own. But he had been nearly delirious when he reached this place, and not in any condition to think ahead. Another mistake; and it was a man's mistakes that cut him down.

Strang seemed content to let the name pass, however. He looked Conway over, his pale eyes roving from Conway's sweat-stained hat to his battered boots. "You must have ridden through a lot of brush country in a hurry, judging from your clothes."

"That I did. In a case of move fast or get shot, I move fast."

"Why'd you go down into Mexico?"

Conway smiled thinly. If he started pouring out a story they'd get suspicious. Make them dig for the lie and they might believe it. "For reasons that seemed mighty good ones to me," he said.

"Where are you from?"

"California, to begin with. Haven't been back there in a long while, though."

"Ever been in Texas?'

THAT was the dangerous question, asked in a manner that was a shade too casual. Strang knew. He was a prudent man who would have taken the trouble to learn as many of the Rangers' names as he could.

Conway looked straight at him and said, "Yes, a time or two."

It was hard to tell, from Strang's colorless eyes, what he was thinking. He smiled knowingly. "You had a job there, eh?"

"I don't take jobs, friend. I've always preferred to work alone. Things got a little too rough for my taste on this side of the line, so I crossed over—and then got chased back."

Strang didn't say anything. He merely waited. Here's a man who likes himself, Conway was thinking. Show him a way he can be big, really big, and he'll get busy thinking of himself in that light and ease off on his suspicions.

"Look, friend, I can put you onto something you'll like. But it's going to cost you. I want a half share, split right down the midlde. You supply the men and I supply the savvy."

"Share of what?"

"Silver, a lot of it." Conway nodded in the direction of Mexico. "There's a mine down there, near a place called Nacozari. Every month they pack out fifty bars of metal, two to a mule, down to a ship that's waiting at the coast. Those bars are worth twenty-five hundred dollars apiece, friend."

Strang's eyes held a restrained glitter. "You didn't do so well at getting them, eh?"

"I tried to go it alone, and got in trouble. Don't let anybody tell you those rurales can't shoot. They may not shoot too straight but they shoot often, and there are a lot of them. I want that silver, though. Next time, with the right kind of help along, I'm going to get it."

"How did you know where to find me?"

"I didn't. I needed a place to light and I'd heard there were some boys up here. Since I've been up here I've drawn some conclusions. You fellows don't look too prosperous to me. Why not reach for something really juicy?"

Strang considered for a minute and then said, "I might." He kept looking at Conway, his pale eyes turning murky. It might be that he was thinking more about Conway, and his real reasons for being here, than he was thinking about the silver. But he didn't want to lose the silver. "Stick around, Conway, while I think it over." He gave Garmish a meaningful look and turned away.

Conway let out a relieved breath. He had bought himself a little time; Strang wasn't sure about him.

Will Garmish said, "Hey, Lew."

Strang stopped, turned. "Yeah?"

"The lady that was here is a real looker, isn't she?"

"She is that. What about her?"

Garmish slid a look toward Ed Conway. Conway's insides began to tighten; just when he had swung things his way, Garmish was going to spoil everything by pointing out that the woman had recognized him. He shifted his position slightly so that he would be able to get at his gun in a hurry.

But Garmish surprised him by saying only, "There's no survey crew working the border, Lew."

"Maybe one moved in just recently," Strang said.

"Man'd have to be in one place for quite awhile, to send back East for his woman and give her time to come out here. If there'd been a crew workin' anywhere in this country for that long a time we'd have heard about it."

Strang's yellow-maned head lifted. "By hell, that's right!"

He swung away and went back up the trail with long, fast strides. Twenty minutes later he came back down, wearing a hat and riding a fast-looking black horse. He rode out through the gap alone.

Garmish smirked and scratched one seamed cheek with a square-cut thumbnail. Conway said, "That ought to get you the bottle after all, Will."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind, Will." Conway stretched himself out on the ground and covered his face with his hat. "I'm going to sleep for awhile."

He merely pretended sleep. His mind was busy with the puzzle of the woman. She had gotten herself into this, and there was nothing he could do to help her now. He didn't think that her Mexican guide would be much help to her either, since the man had seemed a frightened, inadequate sort. But Conway couldn't help wondering about her reasons for being in these mountains at all.

The Santa Margaritas were wild country, lonely country. Some of the peaks were nine thousand feet high, and there were canyons where even an experienced man could get himself lost. Hidden away in that jumble of mountains, Horseshoe Basin was an ideal refuge for outlaws of various sorts. They could make a raid somewhere and disappear into these mountains and sit tight, knowing that nobody was likely to follow them.

If somebody did, they could stand off an army here in the Basin. Or if things looked really bad they could slip into Mexico, only thirty miles away. The dregs of the frontier had gravitated to this place. And now the woman had come here too.

There was a chance that she was what she claimed to be, an Eastern woman trying to reach her husband. It would be about one chance in a million, Conway thought. The more he mulled it over, the more certain he was that she had really recognized him when she first rode in. No Eastern woman could have done that.

The other idea he'd had at the time, that she had picked him out as a man who didn't belong here and had implored him for help,

was no good. He was dirty and unshaved, every bit as tough looking as the others here.

Moreover, no man who had been in this country for any length of time would have sent out a lone Mexican to fetch his wife through these mountains. This was no place for an attractive young woman to be. Nothing about the woman's doings seemed to make sense.

CONWAY'S thinking swung to Lew Strang, and he tried to remember the contents of the file he had seen in El Paso. Strang had been an Army officer, a West Pointer, who had gotten cashiered. He was an educated man and a dangerous one, more clever by far than the general run of badmen.

He never had bothered with the penny-ante stuff, stage holdups and the like, but had worked in a smoother way. He would spend months setting up a job. He could dress well and put up a good front when he chose to do so, and he could work himself into the confidence of people in key positions, and use them.

A good hand with the ladies, he often got information from women like the wife of a mine manager, who once had told him when and in what manner the payroll money was delivered to the mine. Strang had gotten that payroll. And instead of taking the woman with him for the gay fling he had promised her, he had left her to face her disgrace alone.

The Rangers had gotten near to him once or twice, but that was all. He was a prudent man and a wary one; when they sprung their traps he was always somewhere else. Now he was in command of a loosely-knit bunch of hardcases in Arizona Territory, where the pickings were slim. Things must have gone badly for him elsewhere.

When Strang brought the woman back here she might reveal Conway's identity. Conway decided that he would have to get out of here tonight, as soon as it was dark.

He dozed off, finally. When he woke up again, Garmish was nowhere in sight. But he was around somewhere; Conway had the feeling of being watched. Garmish was a sly one, anxious to keep on eating by proving his worth to Strang, and he'd been suspicious of Conway all along.

It was evening now, with the western sky aflame with sunset. Conway got up stiffly and went into his shack. The place was crudely furnished with chairs and a table that had been fashioned from tree limbs. Conway took a drink from his water bucket and stood there for a minute, berating himself for having left the Rangers.

He had been too smart for his own good, dissatisfied with coasting along on a payroll. He had wanted something better than that, had wanted to be his own man. What it had got him was this. He looked around the gloomy cavern-like room, with its tiny fireplace in which he did his cooking. There was mighty little grub left.

Life put its pressures on a man like Ed Conway. As a former Ranger, he was branded in the eyes of every hardcase he came near. He went on taking his chances, but didn't get pay for them now.

Maybe he would turn bounty hunter after all. A man did what he had to do. But he would be a dead hunter if he didn't get out of here. He sat down on the bunk, took out his gun, and checked its loads.

The shells were still in the cylinder—five of them, with an empty chamber for the hammer to ride. He snapped the loading gate shut and thumbed back the hammer absently, weighing his chances of getting a horse. He brought the hammer back to full cock, staring down at it without knowing, at first, exactly why he did so.

Then he saw it. The firing nib, a conical projection on the hammer, should have been more than a quarter of an inch in length and should have ended in a rounded point. It had been flattened off, filed back so that it could no longer reach the primer of the cartridge.

Ed Conway had a gun that looked all right and felt all right, but that couldn't be fired.

He got up and went over to the narrow, glassless window, and looked across the wash. It was nearly full dark outside now. Garmish had his oil lamp going in his shack.

That light was a dodge, though. Garmish

wasn't in his shack, wasn't cooking supper nor reading his book. Conway's eyes made out a vague figure that stirred furtively in the heavy shadow behind the shack. Garmish was out there, watching.

Conway sat down and tried to think. There was only the one door in this shack, and it opened toward the wash. Garmish would see him if he went out; the lamp was placed in Garmish's window so that its sticky yellow glow reached the wash.

Garmish would have to sleep sometime, but there was no telling when that would be. And after about an hour the moon would be up. At any time, even if he got past Garmish, Conway would have to go up to the very end of the Basin, past the old store building, in order to reach the corral where the horses were kept. It was a long trip up there and back down again, with the risk of being seen by the hardcases.

The thing to do was to go out boldly, on the pretext of demanding that Garmish give him some grub. He must get close to the old man and take his gun, without making any noise that would arouse the others.

Conway moved toward his door. It was a heavy door, made of planks that had been warped by sun and dryness so that there were cracks between them. Through the cracks he made out a shadowy figure that blocked off the light from Garmish's lamp.

The door had no lock, only a latch bar that could be lifted from either the inside or the outside. It was lifting now.

The door swung open just enough for a slim figure to dart inside. Then it closed again, without sound. It's Garmish, Conway thought, sneaking in when he thinks I'm asleep.

Conway darted forward and grabbed the intruder, pinning his arms to his sides. There was a gun in the intruder's right hand, and Conway reached it free. But it was a tiny gun, not a six gun at all.

THEN, from the gasp of pain that came to his ears, and from the softness of the body that writhed and struggled under his hands, Ed Conway knew that this wasn't Garmish. This was a woman.

"Let me go!" she gasped. And when Conway stiffened but didn't let her go, she asked, "You are Ed Conway?" in a frightened whisper.

"That's right. But what *is* this?'

"Thank heaven I found you! I didn't know which cabin was yours. When I looked in the one where the light is and saw that there was no one in, I took a chance and came over here."

Conway released her, but kept her gun. "Ma'am, I don't get this at all. How did you get back into this place?"

"I crawled, mostly, so I could keep under the brush and not be seen. I had to find you, Mr. Conway. I've got to have help."

"How did you know me?"

"You were pointed out to me once, across the plaza in Sante Fe. My husband— He was Tom Barlow, Mr. Conway."

Tom Barlow, of the Rangers. "Tom's not down here with any survey crew," Conway said suspiciously.

"No, of course he isn't. Tom is dead."

Conway had a feeling of shock. He had known Tom Barlow about as well as one man could know another when both worked for an outfit that kept shifting its crew around all the time. He had known that Tom was married, but had never seen his wife.

"How did it happen, Mrs. Barlow?"

"There isn't time to talk now. I had a feeling that someone was watching me when I came in here. But I'd better tell you part of it, so you'll know that I've got to have help. Lew Strang killed Tom. The Rangers know it, but they wouldn't even try to bring him back, once he had escaped from Texas, because of the cost of a widespread search. I gave all the money I had to the Pinkerton detectives, and they found out for me where Strang was hiding, and I came here. I've got him now, disarmed and tied up, just a couple of miles away. Julio is guarding him. Julio is all the help I have, and he's badly frightened."

"You've got Lew Strang?" Conway said in a low, hollow voice. "How did you do that?'

"It was simple, really it was. He followed

"Ed, I'm so terribly sorry I messed things up!" Ann said

Julio and me. I have a powerful telescope and I was watching him. When he got near to us I had Julio leave me for a time, and when Strang reached me I told him that Julio had deserted me. Strang was—well, he was trying to kiss me when I got his gun from his holster and struck his head with it. Julio got up the courage to come in and help me tie him, then."

Conway stared at her in the near darkness. She wasn't wearing her hat now. Her face was a pale oval, looking up at him anxiously. She was quite a woman. She must have known of Strang's reputation as a ladies' man and she had come here to bait him, to lure him out of the Basin. She had been smart enough not to be too obvious about it, and yet—

Conway shook his head. "You must be crazy, coming to a place like this alone."

"Your opinion of me doesn't matter, Mr. Conway. But you must help me. With only Julio, I'm afraid that I can't get Strang out of these mountains before those others come after us." She paused, then went on earnestly, "I'm sorry if this spoils whatever it is that you're doing here, but if we take Strang to justice I'm sure your superiors will count it in your favor."

Conway wanted to laugh. Having been married to a Ranger, she knew that they sometimes went far afield to get their men, and often worked without legal standing when they were in other states or territories, or even in Mexico. She thought Conway was still a Ranger, doing a job here.

"I'm just plain Ed Conway now," he told her. "Not a Ranger any more."

"You're not? Why, what happened?"

"I quit.'

"But why? Tom always said that you were the perfect Ranger, a man with no family ties to hamper him, one who never gave up on a job. I can't believe that you'd—" She broke off, drawing a swift breath. "Then if you're no longer a Ranger, what are you doing here?'

She was a smart one, all right. Her mind was quick and wary. Conway didn't answer her right away. He was thinking back to the old times, and to the people he had known then—bluff, kindly Captain Mears, Tom Barlow. Yeah, Barlow—the handsome rounder who mixed women and law enforcement to an extent that made Captain Mears shake his head and wonder if Tom weren't a risk to the organization.

Now Tom Barlow was dead, killed in the line of duty. And Ed Conway, the one-time "perfect Ranger," was the renegade, the man who had quit the outfit flat.

"Never mind what I'm doing here," he said roughly. "I've got to get out, so we might as well do it together."

"You'll help me, then? Conway, I'm not sure about you now. I didn't know that you had left the Rangers. I was all upset after Tom's death, and if someone told me about you it just didn't soak in. How do I know I can depend on you?"

"You don't." He stiffened as his ears caught some slight whisper of movement outside the shack. He reached out, gripping the woman's shoulders, and whispered to her. "Go on talking, just as if I were still here."

He handed her gun to her and then stepped past her and went to the door. Cautiously, straining in the darkness to make no sound, he lifted the latch, opened the door, and stepped outside.

The dark figure of Will Garmish was crouched against the wall below the slit-like window, one ear pressed against the rock to hear what was said inside. Within the shack the woman's voice went on and on, saying something about not trusting Conway.

GARMISH suspected nothing. Conway drew his gun and leaped forward, striking down into that coarse black hair with the heavy barrel of the weapon. Garmish made no outcry at all. He merely crumpled down, groaned once, and then lay there, breathing raggedly. Conway threw his own useless gun aside, and took the one from Garmish's holster, and went back into the shack.

"There was a man outside," he told Mrs. Barlow. "Their guard. He wanted to find out all about me, so he stayed out there and listened rather than going to fetch the others. His mistake." Conway went over to the bunk and rolled up his blankets. "We'd better get out fast."

"Do you have a horse, Mr. Conway?"

"My horse died on me. I have a saddle that Garmish, the guard, lugged up into the Basin somewhere. We'll let it go. I'll walk."

"No, I have a horse for you, waiting with mine outside the gap. It's Julio's horse."

"You were pretty sure of yourself, ma'am, bringing a mount for me."

"Yes. I've found out that when I'm going to do something that seems difficult, I can do best by going right ahead as if I were sure I'm going to succeed. I don't know why, but it always seems to help."

Conway looked at her in the faint light that came through the open doorway. She was a beautiful woman, but she was more than that. She was a woman in a million, one with daring and strength of will. Besides being a

looker, she was a real person. Tom Barlow had been a no-good, and hadn't deserved a woman like that.

They went out through the gap together, hurrying, crawling through brush along the same route that Mrs. Barlow had used in coming into the Basin tonight. Everything was quiet behind them, thus far. By the time they had reached the horses and had mounted, the moon was up.

Mrs. Barlow led the way, following a dim trail that switchbacked up a ridge and descended into a canyon. In a moonlit, grassy spot at the bottom of the canyon Conway saw the two mules, Strang's black horse, and two men. One of the men was lying on the ground.

That one was Strang. He was talking earnestly to the little Mexican when Conway and the woman rode in. His feet were tied together, and his arms were roped tightly to his sides. He broke off the talk and lifted his head to look at Conway, and then said, "So you're what she went after, bucko. You two have been pretty lucky so far. That's a nice piece of bait you used on me, Conway."

"We weren't working together on it," Conway said, stepping down, "but we are now."

"So it's Conway the Ranger, eh?" Strang grinned widely. "Why didn't you speak up, there in the Basin, and put me under arrest?" He started laughing, without making a sound.

"I'm not that much of a fool," Conway said shortly. "If you knew who I was, why did you fool around with me?"

"I wasn't right sure about you, bucko. I'm the only one of the bunch who's been over in Texas much, and I knew there was a Ranger named Conway. But, as you said, it's a fairly common name. I figured I could take my time, and maybe have a little fun with you if you tried to use that gun Will fixed up for you. After all, what would a man do for amusement if he couldn't play cat and mouse once in a while?" Strang gave his silent, mocking laugh once more and looked over to Mrs. Barlow. "Now there's a pretty little mouse."

"I'm not a mouse, Mr. Strang." She had gotten off her horse and was standing with her feet apart, hands thrust into the pockets of her riding skirt. "You're going to find that out more and more as we go along."

Strang shrugged. He had a livid bruise on one temple, strongly contrasting with his yellow hair and sideburns; the woman had hit him hard. "I see you have Will's old gun, Conway. What did you do with him? Cut him down?"

"We left him in the Basin," Conway said shortly.

"All right, you two have me. Now what will you do?"

"We're taking you to Texas," the woman told him. "You're going to stand trial, Mr. Strang."

"Me taken in by a woman?" Strang seemed to find that funny.

"By a woman whose husband you murdered," she said gravely. "I'll tell you my name now. I'm Ann Barlow, Mr. Strang—Tom Barlow's wife."

Strang's astonishment made his rawboned face take on a pasty look. All his self-confidence left him for a moment. "Hell, I didn't know that snake had a wife! So you *didn't* have any husband down here!"

"You're beginning to get it," she snapped. "The Pinkertons were right when they told me that you're a slow thinker. I'd been watching the trail into the Basin for days, waiting for you to go in. Then I let you see me and get interested in me—I know all about what kind of man you are.

"The government survey business was an outright lie, intended to hold you in check long enough for me to get out of there. But then you got to thinking, didn't you, and realized that there wasn't any survey crew down here. You thought you were the cat, Mr. Strang, but you were the mouse all along."

The outlaw swore at her. Then he said, in a blustering way, "How far do you two think you're going to get with me before my boys catch you?"

Conway said, "We'll get as far as we can. Texas, maybe, as the lady says. Can you sit on a horse?"

Strang said no, and showed his teeth in a wide grin. "She hit me so hard that I didn't come to until after she was gone. I've got a headache that I'll remember, and if you put me on a horse I'll just fall off."

"We'll tie you on, friend," Conway said savagely.

HE LOOKED around at the Mexican. As he had noticed before, this Julio wasn't an impressive sort. He was pretty old, and his eyes had an uncertain look. He didn't even own a gun, it seemed, but had struck Strang's fine-looking weapon under the waistband of his tattered pants.

"Get some ropes, Julio," Conway said.

They put Strang on his black horse, tying his feet with a rope that passed under the animal's belly. Conway didn't let him have the reins, but tied his hands behind him in spite of Strang's protests.

"Julio will lead your horse, friend. Mrs. Barlow, you follow along behind him and keep your gun on him every minute."

"All right," she said. "But we haven't enough horses, Conway, for the four of us."

"I'll ride a mule."

It turned out that one of the mules had only a dummy pack which contained nothing of value. But once it was discarded, Ann Barlow insisted on riding the mule herself, bareback.

"We can make better time that way," she said. "You take my horse, Conway, and lead the way. Do you know these mountains?"

"Not too well, no. But I don't want you riding this mule. A mule can get pretty mean if he takes the notion."

"I ride the mule. I'm a determined woman, Conway, and we've got to get out of here quickly. I've done a lot of riding. It was about all I had to occupy my time while Tom was away on trips for the Rangers."

Conway looked at her and shrugged in resignation. One murky corner of his mind was wondering what sort of knothead Tom Barlow had been, to fool around with other women when he had one like this waiting for him at home. They started out, with Conway leading the way straight south.

"Conway!" Ann Barlow called after a time. "Aren't you going in the wrong direction? Tucson is almost due north."

"That's the way they'll expect us to go," Conway called back.

"But they'll find our tracks and know that we've gone this way instead," she protested.

"That's right, they will," he retorted in a dry way that put an end to the talk.

After a time he found what he was looking for; a stream that flowed down from the east and had a hard, rocky bottom. He turned into it and followed it, looking back to make sure that the horses and mules all stayed in the stream. This was slow going, but worth the trouble. They had splashed along for perhaps two miles when Conway saw a wide expanse of shelving rock at the left and turned onto it.

The horses would leave almost no sign on this granite. They toiled upward for an hour, then broke over the top and struck out across rolling country that was studded with big trees.

They were climbing most of the time, heading deeper into the mountains. Finally Ann Barlow called a halt, told Julio to watch the prisoner, and ranged her mule up beside Conway.

"All right," she said, "you're doing fine, up to a point. Riding in that creek so no one could track us was a good trick."

"It's one I've had worked on me, ma'am."

"But now you're heading northeast. That's the long way out of these mountains. I've studied the maps and I know."

"That's right, it is."

"Well, why are you doing it?"

"Look, Mrs. Barlow, if I'm going to help you I've got to do things my way, without stopping to explain all the time. We can lose a lot of time that way. Put yourself in the place of somebody who's lost our trail and starts circling to find it again."

"Oh." She gave him a swift look of comprehension. "They'd think we had tried to throw them off by heading toward Mexico, and that now we'd take the shortest way out. They'd waste time by looking in that direction." Her small, perfectly-formed face lifted in anger. "You're right, of course. But you needn't be so stubborn about it."

Conway didn't know why he had been so rough with her. She didn't entirely trust him, and he couldn't blame her for that. It might be, he thought, that he was inwardly angry with her because of the way she had risked herself out here.

He held to a pace that was as fast as the horses and mules could stand, all through the moonlit hours of that night. Just before dawn they reached high pine tree country, where

the air was bitterly cold. Looking back, Conway saw that Ann Barlow was so tired she swayed on her mule. He found a narrow gully that had had good grass in it, and stopped there.

"We'll get some rest," he called.

While the Mexican was rope-hobbling the animals, Conway untied Strang's feet. "Get down, Lew."

The outlaw got down, almost losing his balance because his arms still were tied behind his back. His pale eyes gave Conway a savage look. "Pretty smart, aren't you?"

"Not smart, just careful—like you always were, Lew. I don't want those friends of yours catching us before we get you out of here."

"You're a long way from Texas, and you haven't any authority here. You can't take me back without extradition proceedings."

"I'm not a Ranger any more, friend. I'm my own man and I can do as I please with you."

Strang was moving his arms as much as the ropes permitted, trying to restore circulation in them. He gave Conway a startled look. "If you're not a Ranger now, what are you getting out of this?"

"The satisfaction of seeing you hang, maybe. Tom Barlow was a friend of mine."

STRANG wasn't laughing any more. Fear was getting into his eyes. "Look, Conway," he said in a low voice, "that Barlow thing went sour on me. There's ten thousand dollars lying around in Texas somewhere, and I can't go back after it. Get it for me and half of it's yours."

"No deals, Lew."

Strang slid a wicked look toward Ann Barlow, who was helping Julio with the horses. "I'm beginning to catch on. The skirt's a parcel, all right. Better sleep with her and collect your pay while you can."

Conway cocked a fist, but changed his mind and merely gave the outlaw a violent shove. Strang staggered back and then fell. He lay quietly, looking at Conway with a hating grin while Conway tied up his feet.

Ann had heard Strang's last remark. Her face was very red in the gray light of dawn. But she said, "Someone will have to stand guard, Conway."

"I'll do that. I'll watch him. Julio, throw a blanket over him."

Strang said. "I can't sleep like this. Aren't you going to untie me?"

"No. You won't be doing much sleeping anyway. You'll be watching me, and I'll be watching you."

Ann turned away, biting her lip. Maybe she was thinking that this was cruel. Maybe she still didn't fully realize what they were up against here, with a man like Lew Strang on their hands.

There weren't enough blankets to go around. Conway got some wood to build a fire and sat beside it, smoking and looking at the figures that were stretched on the ground. The gray little Mexican had fallen into an exhausted sleep almost at once. Ann had remained awake, propped up by an elbow, watching Conway, for a long time. But finally she too had gone to sleep. Strang didn't sleep at all. He lifted his yellow head from time to time to look at Conway with a fixed grin.

When the sun came up Conway let the fire go out. Hours later, the Mexican stirred, got up, and took grub and tin dishes from the mule's pack. Conway watched while the Mexican built up a fire and started fixing breakfast. Julio was about fifty, slight in build and stooped by hardship. He looked as if he had never had quite enough to eat during most of his life.

His full name, Conway found out as they talked in low tones, was Julio Perez y Martinez. He had come up across the line in hope of earning some money, since times were hard down in San Ignacio, Sonora, where his family lived. Mrs. Barlow had hired him in Tucson, not in Benson as she had told Strang.

Ann was awakened by the sound of their voices. She lifted her head and the sunlight struck reddish glints in her dark hair. She looked about for a moment as if she couldn't comprehend how she came to be here, and then she sat up, giving Conway a long, searching look.

He smilled at her a little. "Everything's all right, ma'am. It's near noon, so we'd better eat and shove on out."

They had to untie Strang's hands so he

could feed himself; it was either that or spoon the grub in him. Conway, in a sour mood this morning, figured he could watch the outlaw closely enough to cancel out the risk.

They sat in a half circle around the fire. Strang didn't say anything while they ate, but from time to time he gave Conway a meaningful grin which seemed intended to remind him of that five thousand dollars. Conway didn't need to be reminded of it. Five thousand was a lot of money to a man who was down. And Tom Barlow hadn't really been Conway's friend at any time, merely an acquaintance.

The money was a temptation, all right, as Strang had intended it to be. Ed Conway owed nothing to the Rangers. It was their job to go after Lew Strang for killing one of the outfit. A man who was on his own had to look out for his own interests, and five thousand would give him a fresh start.

Still, he didn't want any part of it. Which added up to the fact that Ed Conway was doing a dangerous job for no good reason at all. He looked at Ann's face and saw her dark eyes watching him. She was a beautiful woman, with the sleek aliveness of a fine horse. He wondered if she had gotten under his hide.

Strang made his move without warning, and with a lightning swiftness that caught Conway completely off-guard. With a forkful of pancake halfway into his mouth, Conway saw the outlaw throw himself to one side, boots kicking the fire and showering embers over the others, while his hands darted into the blankets in which Ann had slept.

Conway saw the glitter of Ann's tiny gun as Strang's hand jerked it up into view. She had kept the weapon beside her while she slept, and had neglected to take it with her when she got up.

Strang had it now. Conway dropped his tin plate and lunged across at the outlaw, tripping over the rumpled blankets so that he fell against Strang and the two of them went down together. It was a close thing. Strang wasn't familiar with the little gun, and seemed to have trouble with it. He fired now, but the bullet went into the air.

It scared Ed Conway, though. It scared him plenty, having the gun go off so close to his face that burning powder grains bit into his skin. He grabbed the gun with one hand and struck at Strang's big-boned jaw with the other, a blow that carried all the might he owned. It landed solidly. The outlaw's body arched in reaction to it, then made a floundering effort to roll away.

Conway let his go. He had the gun now, and he reared up to his feet, breathing hard and glancing down at the little weapon in his hand. It was a ladies' model and had a safety catch on it; that was what had confused Strang.

ANGRILY, Conway threw the thing down and drew the gun he had gotten from Will Garmish. He didn't know why he hadn't used this gun in the first place, except that the presence of a woman who might have been struck by a bullet if a gunfight started had put a restraint on him. That was bad; being hampered like that could get a man killed. A woman had no business on a trip like this anyway.

Strang was lying on his side, panting, looking up at Conway in a way that said he had tried, and would try again.

"Tie his hands, Julio," Conway said thickly. "Then pack up. I'll get the horses and we'll get out of here." He picked up Ann's gun with his left hand and tossed it to her. "Can you shoot straight with that thing?"

She had been brushing away some embers that had clung to her clothing. There was a smell of burned cloth in the air. She caught the little weapon deftly and looked at Conway with eyes that were wide with something like fear.

"Yes, I can," she said.

"All right. Watch him, and shoot him if he makes a move."

Conway was mad. He had nearly gotten himself killed, and for nothing. He went out after the horses and mules, which had drifted for some distance along the gully in spite of their hobbles. He was halfway back to camp, leading the animals, when Ann met him.

"Julio is watching Strang," she said. "Conway, I'm sorry I left my gun in my blankets. It was a foolish thing to do. But you and I had better have a little talk, right now."

"Go ahead and talk. But if Strang tries anything like that again, I'll kill him."

"No, you mustn't. You mustn't do that Conway."

"Why not? You want to be gentle with him, is that it? What do you think they're going to do to him in Texas?"

She bit her lip. "If you hadn't been so harsh with him all along, keeping his hands tied while we were riding and it wasn't really necessary, he might not have tried to break away."

"Treat him gently and he won't make any fuss about being taken to the rope, eh? That's a woman's way of going at things, and it's no good out here. This isn't a woman's game, and you've got to let me handle him as rough as need be. It's his neck he's trying to save, remember. He'll break away from us any chance he gets, and if he can't get one he'll try to pry us apart someway, turn us against each other and thus make a chance for himself. He has you feeling sorry for him already, and he's tried to buy me off. I know his kind, and I'll handle him my way."

She gave him a look of hurt and reproach. "I suppose you're right. But you needn't be so savage about it, Conway."

He shook his head with a shake, saying, "Can't you understand what you've gotten yourself into? You were luckier than you'll ever believe, getting him out of Horseshoe Basin like you did. Don't get to thinking it's going to be that easy from here on. The chances are ten to one his friends will find us before we get out of these mountains."

"Yes, I know. Conway, I overheard what he said to you when we first made camp. About—about me, I mean. I think we had better know exactly where we stand, both of us. I can't understand your leaving the Rangers. Why did you do that?"

"I'm a maverick, not cut to fit in anybody's harness. I wanted to be my own man, with a chance of making some real money so I could buy myself a cattle ranch some day and have something solid. I got an offer from a mining outfit down in Mexico, of a job guarding the silver they shipped out every month. It looked good, so I quit the Rangers and went down there.

"The job was a good one, all right, I got ten times the pay I'd had as a Ranger, and I had some good men working with me. We took the silver through, and made things hot for the bandits who tried to take it from us. But there was a political switch-around, and next morning the leader of the bandits was a general and his *muchachos* were what they call an army down there. He had papers from the new governor of the state of Sonora, entitling him to take over the mine.

"I didn't like having him move in on the silver by the back door, and I was fool enough to try to make a stand. We lost out and I had to get away as best I could."

"You were wounded, Conway. I've noticed that you limp."

"Yeah." He glanced down at the pants leg which he had crudely mended where the bullet went through it. "I'm pretty well over it, though."

"You could go back to the Rangers, Conway."

He smiled down at her crookedly. She was going to tell him that they'd give him his old job back if he took in Lew Strang. He cut her off by saying harshly, "No. I've got to have something better than that."

She looked away. "There's a reward for Lew Strang. I don't know how much it is, but you'd be entitled to it when you get him to El Paso. You can have it all, Conway. I wouldn't want any of it."

That made Ed Conway mad all over again. She was trying to buy him. She was a beautiful young woman of about twenty-five, and no doubt she had learned that the men on this frontier country were rough and demanding in their ways. She thought Conway, the renegade Ranger, was a hardcase, and she was trying to get him thinking about money in order to head him off from making other demands upon her.

"I don't take that kind of money," he told her.

She looked at him, lifting her head. "It won't be the other way, I warn you—not the way Strang suggested to you. If that's what you have in mind, forget it. I've got to take Strang in, but I'll not sell myself to do it."

She hadn't needed to worry about that. Ed Conway had always been a sobersides, concerned with getting ahead and finding a solid

place for himself somewhere. He hadn't avoided women, exactly; and right now he was acutely aware of Ann Barlow's nearness, the softly sad look of her mouth.

He had known a few women pretty well, but had found that the ones who could be had by a man whose job might take him away at any time were always the cheap ones. He wanted something better than that, and he was a man who looked ahead to the long pull. Once he got the kind of life he dreamed of, he would want a woman to share it with him. But he wouldn't get her by some dodge like helping her out of a fix.

MEANWHILE, he held himself in check. He had a lot of stubborn patience, and no taste at all for the kind of life enjoyed by those—men like Tom Barlow—who were continually on the lookout for some skirt or other. Looking at Ann now, Conway wondered how much she had known about Tom's doings. Maybe she knew; her eyes had a haunting sadness in them. But on the other hand, that could be accounted for by grief and loneliness.

"You've got me wrong, Ann," he told her, and cursed himself for having taken so long in answering. "You needed help, and I sure needed to get out of Horseshoe Basin. Let's say it's a fifty-fifty proposition, and let it go at that."

Relief and gratitude flooded her small face. "But Conway, you're away from the Basin now. You don't have to go on risking your life, much as I need your help."

"I'm just stubborn, and fool enough to finish something once I start it."

"Then you will go on?"

"I never told you I wouldn't. How about Julio—can we trust him?"

"I—I suppose so. I'm paying him well."

"Strang will offer him anything he can think of, and Julio's a poor man. How much do you know about him?"

"Very little, except that he claimed to know these mountains. I didn't tell him I was going to Horseshoe Basin at first, only that I had a husband up here and wanted to reach him. When I did tell him the truth, Julio was terrified. But he didn't desert me, even then. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

"Maybe. I'm wondering about you, though—a lone woman, going after a man like Strang in a place like Horseshoe Basin. It's all done now, but it seems crazy when I think about it."

"Why wouldn't I do it? My husband is dead, and the Rangers didn't do anything about Strang."

"That's queer. When a man has killed a Ranger they generally go all out to get him."

Her eyes took on a guarded look. "Well, they kept talking about not knowing where Strang was, and about the cost of bringing him back. And what's so strange about my going after him? If I were a man and Tom had been my brother, it would have been expected of me. As his wife, should I be less loyal to him than that?"

She stopped talking and put out her small hand, man fashion. Conway took the hand and found it soft and yet firm. When he gave her a questioning look she smiled and said, "We're all straightened out, then. I think I can trust you, Conway. I can't offer you any pay, but it should be pay of a sort to know you're doing something for Tom."

"There's one reservation, ma'am. Strang's a snake, and if he cuts loose again I'm not going to stand there and let him kill me. I'm going to kill him."

"No!" She pulled back her hand. "You mustn't do that."

"You said that before. You're holding out on me, Ann, keeping something back. What is it?"

She gave him a faltering, cornered look. "All right, I guess I can tell you now. There was—some ugly talk after Tom was killed. There had been a shipment of money to a bank in El Paso—a very big shipment—and the money disappeared. Tom took it off the train at Marfa to deliver it to El Paso himself, but it was taken from him—by Strang, of course. People said that Tom had been working with Strang, had doublecrossed him, and had been killed by him because of that.

"There was a woman involved in it too, one who worked in the bank. The officers wouldn't let me talk to her. I've got to get Strang back there so that he can be made to tell the truth. He'll have to testify that Tom was only doing his duty and wasn't

working with him at all. That will put an end to the talk."

Conway had a shaken feeling, as if he had been struck a blow. Ann didn't know about Tom Barlow, after all. She believed in him and was trying to clear his name. That was why she had taken crazy chances.

She had been wrong about Tom, though. Conway felt that in his bones. A Ranger had gone bad, just this once. Old Captain Mears had been faced with a difficult choice: bring Strang in and have his testimony blow everything sky-high, including the good reputation the Rangers had built for themselves, or sit tight in the hope that the talk would die down. Mears had chosen to sit tight, it seemed.

"Was the money recovered, Ann?" Conway asked.

"No, none of it was ever found. The officers seemed to think that Strang didn't get it. But he must have, somehow."

"How much money was there?"

"About seventy thousand dollars."

Conway whistled. If Strang had gotten that much he would have lived high and fancy somewhere, instead of holing up in a place like Horseshoe Basin.

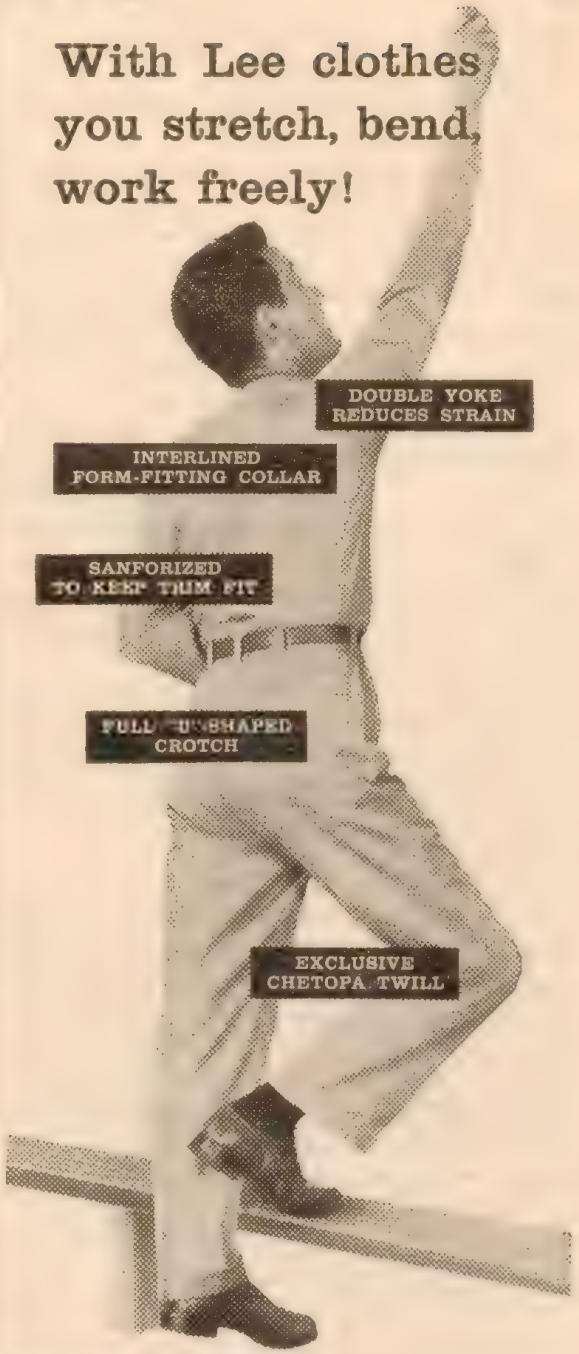
"All right," Conway said. "We'll take him in alive if we can."

Conway was just talking for Ann's benefit, though. There had to be some other way, some way to keep her from getting hurt, as she would be if the real truth came out. But he didn't see how he could do that without killing Strang. Yet he might not be cold-blooded enough to do that unless Strang gave him provocation; and anyway it would make Ann hate him for upsetting her plans.

They walked back to the camp, with Conway leading the animals and Ann striding along beside him. She held her slim body erect, shoulders back and head high. She had an air of self-possession and confidence. It filled Conway with a queer exhilaration, just having her close to him like this.

STRANG and Julio were talking in low tones at the camp. Julio started when he heard the horses approaching, and got very busy gathering up the utensils and

[*Turn page*]



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grub. Strang looked at Conway and Ann with a knowing grin.

He said, "You two had a nice cozy talk out there, eh?"

"Get up," Conway ordered, untying Strang's feet. "Get on your horse."

Strang crossed his feet and threw his weight forward, getting up without help in spite of having his hands behind his back. He swelled his chest and gave his silent, mocking laugh.

"You're the boss, bucko—so far."

During the remainder of the day, Strang kept looking up at the mountains that surrounded them. He was looking for help, and there might well be some around. There had been time for the Horseshoe Basin bunch to realize that they had been tricked, time for them to fan out through the mountains until they found the trail again.

Once, when they stopped to blow the horses, Conway took Julio to one side and said, "He's been talking to you, Julio, offering you big pay to help him out."

"Si, señor."

"Don't listen to him."

"I don' listen, señor."

It was impossible to tell what was going on behind that brown, rumpled old face. But Conway well knew the grinding poverty of such men as this one. Money would be a temptation to him. "You have folks in your own country, Julio. You want to get back to them. The only way Strang will ever pay you off will be with a bullet, and then you'll never get back. Just remember that."

"Si, señor."

Conway gave it up, not knowing whether he had made an impression or not.

Hours later they emerged from heavy timber at the top of a ridge. Far below lay a valley, miles wide and stretching far to the north, with the buildings of a ranch in the distance. Conway's heart leaped. That was the first habitation they had seen, and there should be help to be had down there.

In order to get down they had to dismount and lead the horses diagonally along a steep slope. Conway sent Ann and Julio on ahead with the animals, and followed along with his gun at Strang's back. He took it slow and easy, letting the others get well ahead so that he could talk with Strang privately.

"You were trying to buy me cheap, Strang," Conway said. "You told me there was ten thousand dollars lying around for you in Texas. The real amount was seventy thousand."

Stang didn't look around. He was walking carefully to avoid losing his balance on the steep slope. "She's been telling you about it, eh? Well, get her to tell you *all* of it. I haven't a thing to say to you, Ranger."

"I've told you I'm not a Ranger any more."

"You sure keep acting like one." Strang looked around, now. "Would a third of that seventy interest you?"

"No. Because I don't think you know where it is, any of it. You slipped up badly that time, friend."

Strang swore. "I'm getting a pretty good idea where it is," he said darkly. "I never could understand why Barlow didn't have it on him when I got him, but I think I see what he did, now. The money was being shipped to El Paso by train. I found out about it from a woman who worked in a bank. Barlow got on the train at a water stop and told the boys in the express car that he had a tip the train was going to be held up.

"He was supposed to take the money under his wing, saying that the Rangers would deliver it, and got off at the next town, Alpine. But he didn't. He rode on to Marfa and got off there, crossing me up. He must have mailed that money to his wife, wherever she was, to make sure I didn't get it if I caught up with him."

Conway's mouth twisted bitterly. Strang had run true to form, using someone else as front man—a Ranger, this time. And Tom Barlow, crossing up his outfit for a cut of seventy thousand, had thought it worth the risk to go ahead and cross Strang as well, for the whole amount.

Conway said, "You're thinking wrong, friend. Where was Barlow when you caught him?"

"Up near the Pecos, heading for New Mexico, fast."

It looked bad. Ann had said that Conway had been pointed out to her in Santa Fe. Maybe she lived there. And Tom Barlow

had been headed straight for Santa Fe when he was killed.

But Conway said, "If she had that money, friend, she wouldn't be bothering about you."

"Wouldn't she?" Strang looked around again. "It's the one thing Barlow could have done with it, send it to her. She's going through the motions of helping out the law because she doesn't dare start spending that money until the case is closed and it won't attract attention to her."

"So she takes you in and gives you a chance to tell everybody about her having the money? That doesn't make sense, Lew."

"Nobody will believe what I say. And it might be she doesn't intend to let me talk. She can get me close to Texas and then get me killed, can't she? It'll look good for her, the brave little woman who tried to help the law but had trouble, as might be expected. That's how a woman's head works, bucko, in crafty ways that don't seem to make sense to a man at first. That one's a hellcat, and it'd be a pure pleasure to tame her. Listen, Conway, you could have a lot of fun on a third of that seventy thousand."

"No deals, Lew. I told you that before. And you might as well forget that crazy notion about her having the money. She hasn't got it."

"Then tell me what happened to it, bucko. Think about it. Think carefully. You're not very smart, or you wouldn't have fallen so low as to turn bounty hunter." Strang gave his mocking, silent laugh, and that ended the talk.

THE slope was broken, about halfway down to the valley floor, by a narrow bench where Conway heard a sound of running water. The horses heard it too, and smelled it. They hadn't had water for a long time, and were unwilling to go on until they'd had a drink. Conway wanted a chance to talk with Ann, anyhow, so he left Julio to watch Lew Strang and then, with Ann helping him, led the horses and mules along the bench until he located the water.

It was in a little pool, almost hidden by ferns and brush, into which a steady drip fell from a spring farther up in a narrow cleft. The animals ranged themselves about the pool, drinking eagerly.

Ann stood at the edge of the bench and looked down into the valley. The place was in shadow now, since the sun was low in the sky. "It's a beautiful place, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah. I was talking to Strang a while ago about what happened in Texas. He thinks you have that money."

"Why, that's silly. How could I possibly have it?"

"He says Tom was working with him, and he claims Tom crossed him and sent to money to you, and you've been keeping quiet about it."

Her face whitened. "That's ridiculous, Conway," she said.

"Tom was on that train, though."

"Of course he was, as I told you. It was his duty to do anything he could to prevent the holdup, once he'd gotten wind of it."

"He was up near the Pecos River when he was killed, not on the way from Marfa to El Paso. Ann, where did you and Tom live?"

"In Santa Fe. My people are there, and Tom bought a little house for us so that I could be near them. Of course, he didn't go directly to El Paso with the money, once he found out that Strang was after him. He tried to circle around, but Strang caught him anyway, and took the money."

She had a ready answer for everything, and always one that protected that no-good Tom Barlow. She was blindly loyal to a dead man. It angered Conway, her being so foolish.

"All right," he said roughly, "Strang got seventy thousand dollars and then lived like a bum in Horseshoe Basin. Does that make sense, Ann?"

She turned to face him now. "You're a strange, harsh sort of man, aren't you? You don't believe in anything but yourself."

"We're all strange in one way or another. I guess I'm stubborn, but I've got to get things straight in my mind."

"Ed." This was the first time she had called him by his given name; his heart leaped. "You've got to believe in Tom, and in—in me, Ed. Strang is clever, too clever to let anyone know he has the money. And now you've let him put doubt in *your* mind."

Conway was looking at her with his blood racing, when his eyes registered furtive movement beyond her on the bench. She stopped

talking when she saw his head jerk up. And then he saw that Lew Strang was edging toward them, his big body flattened against the rock slope and his gun uptilted in his hand. There was a triumphant grin on his face.

Conway didn't try for his gun. He and Ann were in the open, and she was between Strang and himself. She would almost certainly be struck by a bullet if shooting started now. He locked his arms about her and plunged in among the startled horses and mules, through the pool and into the cleft where the rock had been worn away by the dripping water. He was hasty about it, and rough; they fetched up against the rock with a jolt that shook both of them. He thrust her around behind him, drew his gun, and looked warily out along the beach.

"No hurry about this, Ranger," Strang called mockingly. "All I want is the horses and the lady. Do I kill you to get them?"

Conway didn't say anything. That damned Julio, he was thinking angrily. I shouldn't have trusted him. He didn't see the Mexican anywhere. He glimpsed a portion of Strang's body and threw a shot at the man, quickly and in anger, and knew that he had missed.

The shot scattered the animals. Tossing their heads, they wheeled away from the pool and galloped back along the bench past Strang.

The outlaw laughed and called, "That gives me the horses. Now send out the lady. I want her real bad, Ranger. Besides being worth seventy thousand to me, she's—"

Conway threw another shot, although he had no target at all because the same rock that shielded him kept him from seeing Strang. He was gripped by an unreasoning fury. It was something he hadn't ever experienced before, something scary; he had always been a steady-going sort who could keep control of himself. He started to step out into the open, but was checked by Ann's hand.

"Ed, please. Don't let him shoot you. I couldn't stand that."

He looked around at her white face in a wondering way. Nobody had ever been concerned about Ed Conway's safety before. But he shook his head to her and looked out once more.

He saw Julio Martinez now. The Mexican was moving along the bench toward the spot where Strang was flattened in a dip of the wall. Julio had a portion of dead tree limb in his hand, and his eyes were fixed upon Strang's back.

Strang didn't see the Mexican coming up behind him. He fired at Conway, and his bullet spanged against the rock inches from Conway's face. Conway jerked back, fragments of the rock gritting between his teeth. He couldn't fire now without taking the risk of hitting Julio.

But he had to know what was happening out there, so he looked again.

Strang sensed the Mexican's presence somehow, and whirled around into full view just as Julio lifted the club to strike. Strang fired at point-blank range. Julio crumpled down, the club spilling from his hand.

Conway fired. He fired in the way the Rangers had taught him, unhurried, coldly taking aim on the middle of Strang's body. The outlaw was moving, though; the shot struck his right arm and spun him violently around.

He didn't lose his gun. He swung to face Conway and fired swiftly, hammering out shot after shot. There was blood on his right hand, and his aim wasn't good. Conway stepped back, however, it would have been suicide to remain out there in the open. Trading shots with a man was a fool's way of fighting.

The Rangers taught you to be prudent and to wait for your chance.

Conway waited, counting the shots. Three, four—the fifth shot didn't come. He stepped out anyway.

Strang had fooled him. No doubt the outlaw knew about the Ranger trick of waiting until a man had emptied his gun and had to reload. Strang had made use of it to get a little time. He had given up here, and now he was running back along the bench to the point where the horses had stopped. He flung himself onto his black gelding and spurred the animal to a leaping run.

Conway aimed and fired, but the horse rounded a bulge of the slope and was gone from sight. The fading sound of hoofbeats drifted back.

JULIO MARTINEZ was hit in a bad place, just under his ribs on the right side. The bullet had gone clear through him. When Conway and Anna bent over him, he stirred weakly and said, "Señor, I am sorry. He fool me. He show me his hands an' they are blue, an' he ask me to loosen the rope a little. W'en I untie it he whirl around an' hit me, hard, an' take from me the gun."

Conway could see how it had been. In order to work on the rope that had bound Strang's hands, Julio had had to put away the gun. Conway had taken Strang's gunbelt and holster away from him during the trip, and had given them to Julio. Strang had left here in too much hurry to get them back, so he was without ammunition now.

Julio hadn't been traitorous, only unwise. He tried to lift himself now, saying, "You mus' get the señora out of this place. Go. It don' matter about me."

Conway got to his feet and saw that Ann was looking up at him with wide, anxious eyes. "Strang's gotten away from us," he said, "so we'll forget him and take Julio on down to that ranch. There'll be someone we can send out for a doctor."

There was no help to be had at the ranch, however. Conway knew that from the moment they reached the floor of the valley, where the grass was belly-deep to the horses. He didn't say anything about that to Ann, but kept hoping that the rancher might have remained here, even though he had no stock on the graze.

They rode slowly, Ann on her mule and Conway on the horse, keeping Julio upright on his mount between them. When they reached the house, Conway's hope was blasted; the doors of the place stood open, and the windows had been smashed. No one lived here anymore.

They found an old rawhide-strung bedstead in one of the rooms. Ann got blankets from the pack and spread them on it. By the time Conway carried Julio in, she had found the stub of a candle somewhere and had lighted it. The ride had been bad for Julio. He was inert, breathing weakly, with crimson foam dribbing from the corners of his mouth.

Ann turned her back and tore strips of clothing from her petticoat. They bandaged the wound with them and then, while Ann tried to make the Mexican comfortable, Conway went out onto the porch. He stood there, smoking and looking out at the gate they had come through.

The moon was up now. In its light he could make out the lettering that had been fashioned from twigs and extended across the arched top-frame of the gate. It read: L-CRESCENT RANCH. He heard Ann come out and he turned to face her, his boots grating on the splinters of windowglass that littered the porch.

"He can't go any farther, Ed," she said in a low voice.

"I know that." Conway looked up at the mountains which still surrounded them. "If any of Strang's friends were near enough to hear that shooting, he's gotten in touch with them by now. He'll be coming after us."

"Yes." She kept looking up at his face. "Julio is a human being, Ed, even if his skin is different from ours. He was brave, trying to stop Strang as he did. Ed, have you any family?"

"Not that I know of. I was an orphan, raised by a drunken horsetrader. Why?"

"If Julio gets medical attention he may live. If he doesn't get it—" Ann pushed a stray lock of hair back from her face. "He has a family, Ed, down in Mexico."

Conway ground his cigarette under a heel. "You don't have to hit me with a club, girl. We're not leaving him."

"What are we going to do, Ed?"

"I've been trying to think it through. We're not out of the mountains yet, but there's a town somewhere north of here."

"Coronado. I remember it from the maps. It must be thirty miles from here, and it's another twenty miles to Benson, where the railroad is. Julio wouldn't live if we tried to take him that far. But this isn't fair to you at all, Ed, making you risk yourself. If you start at once you can get out, and send help back in. I'll stay here and take care of Julio."

"I'm not leaving you here. You're the one Strang wants. He's got that idea about you knowing where the money is."

"That's just a crazy notion."

"Crazy or not, it's the one he has. You couldn't stand them off alone, Ann, so that's no good. You're a good rider, though. Do you think you could find your way out?"

"Well, this valley must drain into the lower country, so if I follow it down— But Ed, I don't like—"

"Come on." He took her arm and led her out to the horses. "Better not take time to eat. Take this horse I've been riding." He looked up toward the moonlit end of the valley, but saw no movement there. "Good luck, Ann."

She reached for the reins but then paused, looking back at him. "Good-by, Ed. You're a fine person, doing this for someone you hardly know."

"Maybe you and I are different from most people. Ride on out, fast. Send back a doctor, and the law if you can."

She gave him a strained look. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

He nodded, and part of his mind was telling him that he might not see her again, ever. That broke his restraint, and he turned her around to face him and kissed her—not harshly, but in the way of a rough man who was being awkwardly gentle.

"Oh, Ed, Ed!" She clung to him, surprising him with the fervor of her response.

"You're the woman for me, Ann, if you'll have me."

"Then you've felt it too? I tried to fight against it because I didn't trust you at first— Ed, I can't leave you here. Not now!"

"You've got to," he said thickly. "Go find that doctor."

WHEN she was gone he hobbled the remaining horse and the mules, and limped back into the room where Julio lay. The wounded man's breathing made a faint wheezing sound in the silence. Conway cleared glass fragments from a portion of the floor and spread his blankets there.

In the morning Julio was no better. Still unconscious, he just lay there, his old brown face slack and his eyes closed. Conway built a small fire outside, heated water in a tin can, then tore some more strips from the petticoat Ann had left. After boiling the strips he used them to replace the blood-soaked original bandages.

He didn't know what else to do. If this had been merely a flesh wound it would have been fairly easy to handle. But there was no telling what damage had been done inside that ribby little body.

There was a well at the rear of the house, wtih a bucket and a rope that wasn't too rotten for use. Conway drew water for the animals, then cooked a meager breakfast. After eating he lighted a cigarette and hunkered down at one corner of the house, looking up at the mountains.

He saw no one up there. But there was a lot of brush and timber from which men could watch him wtihout letting themselves be seen. And they were there. Conway had the feeling that distant eyes were upon him, watching every move he made.

He took all the gear into the house. The place would make a fairly good fort, since its walls were made of peeled logs and they were thick ones. But it had three outside doors and a lot of windows that had had all the glass shot out of them. No one man could stand off an attack here, if it came from several directions at once.

Julio grew steadily worse during the day. The first shock of the wound had worn off, but fever was building in him now. He was never entirely conscious and at times he was delirious, trying to rise up on the bed, babbling incoherently in Spanish. Conway tried to get a little food and water into him, but failed for the most part.

Night came, and Conway spent most of it outside on the porch, not sleeping at all. He had taken a chance on getting some rest the first night, on the likelihood that Strang hadn't had time to get together with his friends. It was different now.

Julio's fever was higher on the second day. He seemed to be burning up, and nothing Conway could do seemed to help him. On the evening of that day, while Conway was smoking on the porch, the company came.

They came riding up the valley, three mounted men who jogged along with their eyes fixed upon the L-Crescent house. Conway's heart leaped when he first saw them, since they might have been sent in by Ann

and this would prove she had gotten out safely. But, watching them narrowly, he saw that their gear was not the sort townsmen would have: Too, they didn't seem worried about approaching this place, as men who had been warned by Ann of the danger in the valley would be.

When they swung in through the gate and stopped, the rail-thin, bearded one who was a little ahead of the others called, "Hey!"

Conway was at one corner of the house now, his back against the logs, his gun lifted high in his hand. He called, "What do you want?"

The bearded man cast a swift look in Conway's direction, spat, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "No need to be edgy, friend. I'm Jake Logan and these are my boys, Sam and Ben. It's getting late and we'd like to camp for the night, if it's all right with you."

"What brings you here?"

Logan rested a forearm on his saddle-horn. "Why, we're just riding through. We heard this place was for sale and decided to swing by and see if it's worth our time."

They looked like cattlemen, all right. At least they had stockmen's gear, and they carried catch ropes on their saddles. The two "boys" looked to be near thirty, and the old man was about sixty.

Conway stepped out into view, partly to get a better look at them. "Where'd you come from—Coronado?"

"Not recently, no. We've been scouting this border country for awhile, looking for a place to light. Seems as though you could put away that gun, friend. You're not alone here, are you?"

"Not exactly alone. I have a Mexican with me, who's been shot."

Logan spat again. "Well, can we camp for the night?"

"Light down."

Conway shrugged and holstered his gun. There was a chance that they were what they claimed to be. It was possible that they had just happened by at this particular time. But it wasn't likely. They hadn't asked how Conway happened to be here, and they were a little too incurious about Julio being shot.

The strong possibility was that they were some of Strang's friends. Conway hadn't seen these three at Horseshoe Basin, but they could have been holed up elsewhere in the mountains. It might be that Strang had sent them to find out whether Ann Barlow was still here. It was probable that Strang, busy locating some help for himself at the time, hadn't seen Ann ride out. He wouldn't want to take chances on getting shot in making an attack if she weren't here, though.

If that were the case, Strang hadn't followed her when she left. Conway had worried about that, and he breathed easier now. But not for long. He got to thinking that if these men had been sent by Strang, they would be aiming to get on the inside and be in a position to cut him down from behind when things came to a fight.

He couldn't be certain about any of this. It gave him an edgy feeling.

THE Logans didn't bother him during that night, although he watched them. They built up a fire in the yard, cooked their supper, and rolled into their blankets.

The doctor came next morning, just as the Logans were getting up. He was a testy little man by the name of Newcomb, and he had been driving all night in his buggy.

"That Mrs. Barlow is a determined young woman," the doctor said when Conway met him at the gate. "I told her that I had patients to look after in Coronado, but she insisted I come up here."

Conway was aware of the glances exchanged by the Logans, who had overheard this. He said, "The sick man's in the house, doc."

The doctor took his bag from the buggy and followed Conway into the house. He snipped Julio's bandages with a tiny pair of scissors, looked at the wound, thumbed up one of the Mexican's lids to peer into an eye.

"How long since it happened?"

"Three nights, two days. Can we move him out of here?"

"No. He would be dead right now if you hadn't kept him here. The bullet passed through his lungs, and there's no telling what other damage it did. About all I can do is disinfect the wound and watch him. In a day or so we should know whether he's going to make it. Is he a friend of yours?"

"No, not exactly."

The doctor's cold blue eyes looked Conway over. "You're doing this for a Mexican you hardly know?"

"He did something for me, or tried to. Look, if you're wondering who's going to pay you for—"

"I wasn't thinking about that," the doctor snapped. "But I've found that human life isn't valued very highly in this country, and your attitude is something new to me. I'll do what I can. He's full of infection, and this long unconsciousness looks bad. It's not my job to ask questions about what happened here. Mrs. Barlow said only that there had been a shooting, and she asked if there were a law officer in Coronado. I told her there wasn't, but that there's a deputy sheriff who lounges around in Benson. She gave me directions for reaching this place, and then she left for Benson."

"You didn't see anybody following her when she left?"

"No, I didn't." The doctor gave Conway a sharp look, but then began taking instruments from his bag.

The Logans had a breakfast fire going in the yard when Conway went outside. The doctor had demanded boiled water, so Conway got a large tin can and filled it from the well bucket and placed it on the fire.

"We have plenty of grub," the bearded Jake offered. "Sit down, friend, and eat with us."

"Well, I'll throw in some of mine to go with it," Conway said. "I'll need a meal for the doctor as well as for myself."

"Anything you say. How's your friend making out?"

"He's bad off."

Conway was not missing the sly alertness in the eyes of those three. Maybe they were hoping he would make some slip which would tell them whether he was or was not expecting Ann to come back here alone. He wasn't; but as he sat down he glanced around at them, and saw that all three carried well-worn sixguns. That in itself, though, didn't mean much of anything.

"You boys riding out today?" he asked.

"We thought we might look around a little," Jake said. "This valley looks good. A man could run a thousand cattle in here. Seems some Eastern folks started up this ranch and then found out there were hardcases in these mountains that could rustle stock faster than they could raise it, so they got discouraged and quit. Are there any objections on your part, if we look the place over?"

"It's not my ranch. Help yourselves, boys."

Conway watched them while they saddled up and rode on out. They had left their blankets and cooking gear, so they intended to come back. At no time had they asked just what had happened in the shooting of Julio Martinez. That might be put down to the natural reticence of men who lived in the land where questions weren't welcomed, or it might be that it hadn't occurred to them to ask, because they already knew.

If they were working for Strang, they were being slyly careful. If Conway called them on it and told them of his suspicions they would blandly deny that they had ever heard of Lew Strang. And the hell of it was, they *might* be telling the truth. Either way, they would resent being questioned. And Conway would be one man against three.

When the water had boiled awhile, he folded a bandanana to keep the can from burning his fingers. Carrying the water and the doctor's breakfast, he limped into the house.

Julio had several bad spells during the day. Once he got to babbling and struggling again, so that it took both Conway and the doctor to hold him down.

Toward evening Ann Barlow rode in. Conway was helping the doctor at the time, and glanced warily out through a window when he heard the lone horse come into the yard. When he saw Ann he ran out to her.

"Ed!" she cried, coming swiftly into his arms. "Thank heaven you're all right. Did the doctor come out?"

"Yes, he did."

"How is Julio?"

"Pretty bad."

She drew back a little, giving him a look that held a veiled hurt that was occasioned by his abruptness. "I went to Benson and found a deputy sheriff. He was partly drunk, and he said that he was just one man and he couldn't do anything for us. He claimed that

the law has given up trying to do anything in the Santa Margaritas. I sent a telegram to the sheriff in Tucson, but though I waited hours I didn't get any answer. So I sent another one to El Paso, telling the Rangers that Lew Strang was here if they wanted him. Then I started back. I bought some groceries and a rifle in Coronado, and— Ed, why are you looking at me like that? Have I done something wrong?"

"It was dangerous for you to come back here. Ann, why did you do it?"

"Could I do anything else?" She took hold of his arms, smiling and trying to shake him a little. "Oh, Ed, you're not a man who changes his mind about things. We've both decided about—about us, haven't we? And my place is by your side."

It had not occurred to Ed Conway, at the time she left, to tell her that she was not to come back here. And he couldn't blame her much for doing it. She had been wrought up about getting help for him, all the time she had been away, and she still didn't realize what she had done by returning to the L-Crescent. Strang would move in on them now.

"Go in the house," Conway told her, "and stay there."

He took her horse around to the back of the house, where there was a shed, and hid animal there. That was no good, of course; Ann must have been seen as she rode up the valley. He untied the strings that held a floursack of groceries behind the cantle, took the new Winchester from its boot, and went into the house.

ANN and the doctor were talking in low tones in the room where Julio lay. Conway put down the groceries in the hall and stood there a moment, trying out the action of the rifle.

Ann heard the click of the mechanism and came out of the room. "I noticed that you've been cooking out in the yard," she said. "If you'll build up the fire I'll fix a real supper."

"No, don't go out there. We've got company hanging around, three men who pretend to be looking this place over. I think Strang sent them to find out if you were still here."

Her breathing stopped. "Ed I've been dense, haven't I?"

"It's you he's after. You and that seventy thousand."

"But I haven't got it! How can he possibly think—"

Conway didn't answer that. He stepped past her and went into the room where Julio lay. The Mexican was better; his eyes fluttered open and he looked up at Conway, saying, "Señor, I got to thank you."

Conway gripped the small brown hand that Julio lifted from the covers, and said, "You're going to be all right, amigo. Just rest easy." Then he nodded to the doctor, who followed him out into the hallway.

"Doc, we've gotten you into something," Conway said. "The law has refused to help us, and some hardcases are going to be hitting us soon. If you get in your buggy and let them know who you are, I reckon they'll let you leave."

Newcomb snapped, "I'm not in the habit of deserting my patients when they need me. It's still a close thing for Julio. If internal bleeding starts again I'll have to be here to deal with it." He gave Conway a testy look and went back into the room.

Ann said, "I can undo the harm I've done, Ed. I'll ride out. There's still enough light for them to see and recognize me. They'll follow me and leave you alone."

"No, you'll not throw yourself away like that. Did you bring shells for this rifle?"

"They're in the sack. Ed, what are we going to do?"

He didn't know, so he merely shook his head. He got one of the boxes of shells, broke it open. After loading the rifle and filling his pockets with the rest of the shells, he went outside.

He looked around for the Logans, put didn't see them anywhere. Everything was quiet, too quiet. He circled around back of the house with the hazy idea of finding some spot where he could fort himself up and cover all approaches to the place, but found nothing that would do. He was standing there, somberly listening to Ann's horse paw the dirt floor of the shed, when Ann came out to him.

"Ed, I'm terribly sorry I messed things up. I wasn't thinking, I suppose. That idea about

me having the bank's money is so silly that I didn't even stop to consider what Strang might do on account of it. And I was scared, afraid of what might be happening to you while I was gone. I only made things worse. But we'll get through this somehow." She glanced around at the valley, which now was almost hidden by darkness. "Ed, you said that you wanted to own a cattle ranch someday. This could be made into a fine one."

"That's an idea that's been growing on me. But the way things are now—"

She lifted herself on tiptoe, put her arms about him, and tilted up her face. "We've got to keep thinking that everything is going to work out fine. Be sure about that, my darling."

It was a strange sort of idea she had, that thinking would make things right. She was trying to jar Conway out of his somber, dogged way of facing things, trying to make him think of the future and to put some fire into him. She meant well; he smiled wryly as he kissed her. It turned into a hungry, demanding sort of kiss. Conway hadn't let himself go in this manner, with a woman, for a long time.

She clung to him with an ardor that matched his own. "Oh, Ed, we need each other!" she said in a distraught whisper. "I'm not a cheap woman, but I'm not a cold one either, and I've been so lonely. And you've always lived too much in the future, I think. That's admirable of course, but it isn't good for a man to keep holding himself in check. Ed, when this is over—"

He took her back into the house, sensing that she hadn't intended to lose control of herself to the extent that she had. "I'll go out and build a supper fire," he told her. "We'll let them think we don't suspect anything. But this time, Ann, stay in the house."

He still didn't know what he was going to do. If this had been a matter concerning himself alone it would have been simple, but now he had to think about Ann's safety and that of the doctor, and Julio as well.

He had gotten the fire going and was putting grub into the cooking cans when he heard a horse approaching—one horse. He grabbed up the rifle and backed away from the fire, putting it between himself and the sound. It was pretty dark now, out beyond the blaze.

A voice called, "Conway!"

He backed to the corner of the house before answering. That had been Lew Strang's voice. "What do you want?" Conway called.

"The woman. I saw her come back from wherever she'd gone to. Turn her over to me and you and I'll get along fine."

"You don't want her, Lew. She never saw that money."

A brief laugh sounded in the dark. "Still fooled by a pretty face, aren't you? All right, bucko, I'm coming after you!"

Conway swore under his breath. He had been a fool to build up that fire, which now threw its flickering light against the whole front of the house. He had been thinking more of the Logans than of Lew Strang at the time. Now the light would strike him if he stepped past the corner of the house. And he still couldn't see Strang.

A deep voice, close at hand, said, "You want help, friend?"

CONWAY darted a look past the corner of the house and saw that Jake Logan was standing in the front doorway with a sixgun in his hand. He might be sincere about helping Conway, or he might be trying to lure him out into the open. He must have entered the house from the back.

Ann's warning cry came from the house, then, "Ed, look out for them! They're in here." The words ended in a scream. There was a sound of struggling inside the house, then a shot, then silence.

Conway put down the rifle and drew his sixgun. As he did so he was stung by the feeling of being watched from somewhere behind him. He heard a faint sound back there in the dark, and whirled around and saw the shadowy figure of a man at the back corner of the house. Something glinted in the man's hand and then blossomed sudden flame.

Throwing himself to the ground, Conway sensed the swift passing of the bullet. The muzzle flame had given him a brief look at the face of the man who was trying to kill him. It was one of the Logans. They were

taking no chances with Ed Conway. Jake had spoken to him in order to set him up so this other one could shoot him in the back. Conway fired. The shadowy figure spun around and fell.

Conway scrambled to his feet and charged around to the porch. Jake Logan was coming along it, and they both fired at almost the same instant. Jake's bullet touched Conway's ear like a hot brand. Conway's shot, more carefully aimed, struck the old man squarely. Logan was driven far back, then lurched sideways and toppled off the edge of the porch.

Bullets reached for Conway from out beyond the fire as he darted to the doorway. He was moving fast, however; he reached the door and plunged inside.

In the dimlight that reached through the window of Julio's room he saw that Ann and the doctor were standing beyond the bed. He tripped over the body of the man who was sprawled in the doorway, looked down and saw that it was the third Logan.

"He came in here and seized Mrs. Barlow," Newcomb said. "When she started struggling with him he had his hands full, so I shot him." The doctor looked down at the double-barreled derringer he had in his hand. "I go armed, in this damned country. Are there any more of them out there?"

"One," Conway said, "at least. You folks stay here."

"Ed, be careful!" Ann's voice called to him as he went out.

There was no more shooting now. There was only silence out beyond the fire, as Conway darted to the corner of the house to get the rifle. He threw a shell into the Winchester's chamber and sent the bullet screaming past the high gate frame and on out across the night-shrouded range.

There was no answering shot, but a horse spurted to a sudden run out there, hoofs drumming the earth as it raced away. Conway couldn't see it, but he didn't think Strang would be scared off this easily. So the horse had been left ground-hitched and now had no one in the saddle to check its frightened run. Strang was afoot, and would be moving in on the house.

The fire had a certain backhanded usefulness now. Strang would not approach the house from the front, where its light would show him up. Conway ran around to the back.

There he waited. The horse in the shed made a questioning nicker; it had heard or smelled someone whose presence Conway could not detect, and it was hopeful of being let out of there. Conway searched around the shed with his eyes and, with the stars getting brighter, he made out the tall, quiet figure of Lew Strang.

"Lew," Conway called out, "I've got a rifle on you. Don't make me use it." He could see the crude bandage on Strang's arm now.

The outlaw stopped, his head turning slowly as he strove to locate Conway. His teeth made a faint whitish arc in the gloom. Even now he was full of confidence, laughing that silent laugh of his.

"Drop your gun, Lew," Conway said.

The gun in Strang's hand made a sudden mushroom of flame, but the shot missed. Conway fired with the rifle, and didn't miss. Strang was dead when Conway limped over to him.

Ann came running out of the house, with the doctor following her. Conway said, "I'm sorry, Ann. I had to kill him."

"I know, Ed. It doesn't matter, I guess."

No more men came to the L-Crescent that night. Conway reasoned that Lew Strang hadn't fetched his friends from Horseshoe Basin because he didn't trust them, in a matter that he thought meant seventy thousand dollars to him. Then, too, the Basin was far away; probably the Logans had been holed up somewhere nearer at hand.

The doctor patched up Conway's ear. They all were preparing to leave, next morning, when the twenty-man posse from Tucson rode in.

The sheriff was a chunky, sweaty man by the name of McNye. "We took the train to Benson," he explained, "and got horses there. I was too busy to bother with this when Mrs. Barlow telegraphed me. But then Mears, of the Texas Rangers, started firing telegrams to everybody from the Territorial governor on down. They all got to jabbing me. Where's

this man Strang?"

"Out back," Conway said, "with three others that I dragged around there—Jake, Ben, and Sam Logan. I covered them all with rocks, but you'd better bury them properly." Conway was in a dark mood this morning; he had done a lot of killing here, and it was going to take him some time to get over that.

"You got the Logans?" the sheriff asked. "We've been after those cattle thieves for months."

"Not very hard, though," Conway said acidly.

He turned to Ann, but she was ready for him. No," she told him, "you're not going back to Texas with me, Ed. Stay in Coronado and let the doctor care for your leg until it's really well. I'll not drag you through what may be ahead. I've never let myself face the possibility that Tom may have been crooked after all, but I'm afraid I must face it now. If Strang believed in my having that money strongly enough to die trying to get it—"

WHILE they were about it the lawmen from Tucson went ahead and cleaned out Horseshoe Basin and the rest of the Santa Margaritas. It got them a lot of space in the Territorial newspapers, and that sort of thing never hurt a sheriff's chances for re-election.

Ed Conway got himself a contract hauling dynamite from the railroad to the mines up in Silver City, New Mexico. It was rough work, dusty and dangerous, but it paid well. At the end of six months he had his outfit paid for and had saved enough money to make a down payment on a ranch.

He wrote to a real estate agent in Tucson, asking about the L-Ccrescent. The answer he got back jolted him. The ranch had been sold, just a couple of months ago, to a woman who lived in Santa Fe, a Mrs. Barlow.

Conway had not heard from her during all this time, even though he had left word of his whereabouts in Coronado. At first he had thought of writing to her, but hadn't known her address. He never had been much of a hand to write letters anyway. Now he got to glooming and wondering if she had changed her mind about him. She hadn't seemed the flighty sort, and yet. . . .

Maybe she was mad at him because he had killed Strang, and thus had spoiled her chances of clearing Tom's name by forcing Strang to talk. Maybe she still was loyal to the memory of a man who never had deserved a woman like her. Conway knew it wasn't logical to be jealous of a man who was dead, but he couldn't help the way he felt.

After hiring a half-breed to drive his wagon during his absence, Conway rode over into Arizona. At the L-Crescent he found Julio Martinez and a couple of other Mexicans cleaning out the well and putting the corrals in shape.

"Si, señor," Julio said, grinning widely. "The Señora Barlow buy this place. She not come back here yet, but she write to me from Santa Fe. W'en she get cattle on this place she 'ave the fine ranch here." He looked Conway over. "Señor, I owe you much. But I tell you this: from the look you got, I think you better go find that lady *pronto prontito!*"

"Yeah," Conway said, and rode away.

It was Ann's privilege to buy the L-Ccrescent if she could afford it. But where had she gotten the money? Maybe she had fooled everybody about that seventy thousand. A lonely and jealous man could think up a lot of searing things to torture himself with. But Conway was stubborn enough to find out about them for sure before giving up. He went to Santa Fe.

He was walking under the portico of the government building, wondering how he should go about locating Ann Barlow, when he looked across the plaza and saw her.

She was strolling alone, a beautiful woman in a colorful dress, wearing a wide, lacy-brimmed hat to shield her from the sun. When Conway went over to her she took both his hands and looked up at him, saying simply, "Ed, you've come to me."

All the doubts that had tortured him were swept away as he looked at her. He grinned and said, "That was a dirty trick you played, lady, buying the L-Crescent out from under me!"

"Ed! I didn't know where you were, and I didn't hear from you. I inherited a little

money from an aunt who died back East, so I made a payment on the ranch to keep someone else from buying it before we could." A shadow of sadness crossed Ann's face. "It was pretty bad for me, Ed, going back to Texas. Captain Mears was very kind, but—well, the Rangers had found that money."

"Found it? Where?"

"In a house in Marfa. They found out that Tom had been friendly with the woman who lived there, and that he had visited her the night he got off the train with the money. He had hidden it in her house, and she didn't even know it was there. So Tom was what people said he was, after all. He must have intended to go back after the money."

"Don't blame Tom too much, Ann. A man can't help being what he is."

"I don't, not any more. I've been hurt, and I guess it's given me a sort of depth and made me more tolerant of things. I'm still a determined woman, though. I knew that you would come to me, once you had gotten everything ready in your careful way. We'll have to work hard to make the L-Ccrescent pay for itself. I haven't any money left to buy stock, but perhaps we can borrow."

"I'll take over the worries, lady. I want to see you smile, in all the days ahead. If you can put up with a rough one like me—"

"There's another thing, Ed." She glanced away. "There was a big reward for Lew Strang, dead or alive. Captain Mears is holding it for you."

"I don't want that kind of money. We'll take it, though—" Conway was aware of the sudden catch of Ann's breath; he smiled at her as he finished— "and give it to some charity or other."

She slipped her arm through his and glanced up at him with a shy, deep pride. "Ed Conway, you're a stubborn fool. A very good kind of fool."

They moved off across the plaza together.

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. If a bear and a mountain lion should learn to count their own toes, which would have to count higher?

2. Which of the following is often called "Father of Texas Trail Driving," having trailed a herd all the way to Illinois in 1858: Oliver Loving, Charles Goodnight, Bat Masterson, Shanghai Pierce?

3. In describing types of outdoor areas, cowboys often use the terms "breaks" and "brakes". What does each mean?

4. Besides the flag of its own short-lived Republic, the flags of Spain, Imperial Russia, England, the Empire of Mexico, the Republic of Mexico and the U.S.A. have flown over parts of what state?

5. Murals by the famous western artist, Harold D. Bugbee, were recently dedicated at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum at Canyon —in what state?

6. When a cowman says that his herd is "clean," he might mean either of what two conditions?

7. Are a latigo and a cinch the same thing?

8. Do naturalists believe there is such a species in the west as the hydrophobia skunk?

9. If a ranch boss asked you to "rustle the pasture," what would he expect you to do?

10. Las Vegas, N. M.; Canyon, Texas; Colorado Springs, Colo.; Oklahoma City, Okla.; and Dodge City, Kans., were among the contenders for the site of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. Which was chosen?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

The Gun Rider

JOSÉ HAD NEVER learned to read and write. The only thing he understood was the gun, and now it was turned against him. . . .

By H. A. DeRosso

"They'll search every inch of the country for Vincent," José said

HE RODE into San Onofre from the north the dust of a long ride on his face and on his clothing. The hoofs of his black horse made sharp solid sounds on the hard-packed earth of the lone street of the village. Faces peered at him from glassless windows and open doorways. People that he had known all his life watched as he rode by. He nodded to several of these but they showed no greeting, only a stony recognition. Anger flared in him. You do well to fear me, he thought.

Ristras of chili peppers made bright red loops against the soft tan of the adobe hut where he had been born. It had always been like this in September as long as he could recall—the ristras, strung by the hands of his mother, drying in the sun. He reined in the black horse and dismounted, then took off the flat-crowned, stiff-brimmed charro hat and brushed at the dust on his trousers. A sleazy sensation was gathering in his stomach. Replacing the hat on his head, he stepped inside.

Spur jingle told the woman he had entered. She was bending over the hearth and she came around abruptly, visibly startled, mouth gaping as she sucked in an audible breath.

"José," she whispered, staring at him. There was no warmth in her eyes.

He felt awkward and ill at ease. The black-handled pistol rode very heavily now in the holster at his side. He could feel the weight of it, pulling at him.

"How goes it with you, mamacita?" he asked.

"Well."

The lie to this lay in the wrinkles ever deeper in her face, and in the increasing graying of her black hair. She rubbed the palms of her large, work-worn hands against the long black skirt she wore and went on staring at him. Warmth had not yet touched her eyes.

The many things he wanted to tell her choked in his throat. It had been like this ever since he had started wearing the pistol. Anger stirred anew in him, anger and something else that made his voice gruff.

"I have brought you gold," he said, throwing a tiny buckskin pouch on the table. "Buy yourself all the things you need."

"I need nothing. I need no gold."

"You mean you do not need *my* gold. Is it not so?"

She lowered her head and stared at the floor. She said nothing.

"Answer me," he said. "Why will you not take my gold?"

Her head lifted. Defiance brightened her dark eyes and made her mouth quiver. "It has blood on it."

"This gold has no blood on it."

"It has the blood of Luis Varga."

"I am innocent of Varga. I was not in Rio Seco. I was in Arrowhead."

"And had you been in Rio Seco?" she asked softly.

To this he had no answer. His eyes sought the open window and studied the bleak thrust of the Capitans in the distance. The taste of gall was in his mouth.

"Why do you hurt me like this, my son? Why do you shame the memory of your father?"

Sweat broke out on his forehead, sweat lined the palms of his hands. "I have only sought to better myself. What else is there for me? Do you want me to be like the other men of the village, a farmer and a tender of sheep and goats? Do you want me to be poor all my life? I have a good horse, I wear good clothes, my belly is always full, and I have gold to give to you. You need not work any more, mamacita. You can buy all that you need and more with the gold I give to you."

"The gold with blood on it?"

"I tell you I am innocent of Varga!"

"Are you also innocent of Contreras?"

Two drops of sweat trickled over his upper lip. He dabbed at them with his tongue, tasting salt. "That was six months ago. Contreras was an assassin. I killed him to save another man's life."

"The señor Merriman's?"

"The señor Merriman has been good to me. He rewarded me with gold and a job."

"The job of a paid pistolero."

"That is better than the job of tending stinking sheep and goats."

"Is it, my son?"

IT WAS futile to expect understanding here. He could have wept. "I only meant to provide well for you, mamacita."

"I can provide for myself, José."

"I only do what others are doing."

"I do not ask this of you. I do not ask you to kill."

"I am no killer."

"Then what are you doing back in San Onofre? It is a month since you have been here."

His glance sought the window again. In him something tortured was crying.

She said, "I have heard not only of Luis Varga but also of the matter of the printing press in Arrowhead. The blood of the señor Vincent is not on your hands because he escaped from Arrowhead. All the pistoleros of the señor Merriman are hunting Vincent. Is that why you have returned to San Onofre?"

"Vincent is a troublemaker. He seeks to turn everyone against the señor Merriman with the stinking lies he prints in his paper."

"If they are lies, why does the señor Merriman fear Vincent?"

"The señor Merriman fears no one."

"Then why does he hire pistoleros?"

He made an anguished sound. His fists balled so tightly the nails dug into his palms. "Mamacita, have you no faith in me?"

"Do not call me mamacita. I have no wish to be the mother of a killer."

Afterward he led the black horse back down the street and stopped in front of the cantina of Santiago. Every move he made, he could feel eyes watching him. Cobardes, he thought, it will go bad for all of you if Vincent is here in San Onofre.

He found Santiago behind his rough plank bar, dozing, lips fluttering with each whistling exhalation of breath. There was no one else in the cantina. José brought his open palm down flat and hard on the bar, and the sharp sound of this woke Santiago. He came to with a snort and a quick batting of the eyelids which stilled when recognition came.

"Gomez," Santiago whispered.

Gomez, he thought. Once it used to be José and even Joselito. Now it is Gomez.

"Santiago," he said, "you know of everything that passes here in the village. There is not a secret that is not discussed in your cantina. Tell me, is that pig of a Vincent in San Onofre?"

Santiago shook his massive head. His breath whistled asthmatically. "I know nothing of any Vincent."

"You have not heard of Arrowhead and the printing press?"

"I have heard of nothing."

"That is a lie. My mother knows of Arrow-

head. You would be the first to hear of a matter like that. Is Vincent in town?"

Santiago's head swiveled slowly from side to side. "I know of nothing, José."

Gomez could feel wrath tightening the walls of his stomach. He liked the sensation of anger. It made him forget those other things.

"If Vincent is here I shall remember you, Santiago."

"I know nothing."

"I shall search the village. I shall search every house and shed."

"Search, then."

"I shall start with your cantina. If that pig of a Vincent is anywhere in San Onofre, it will go bad for you. Take heed, Santiago."

He had started to turn away when Santiago said softly, "Take heed it does not go bad for you, José."

Gomez spun on a heel, spurs ringing. "What do you mean?"

Santiago's eyes sought the floor. Sadness touched his voice. "May you never learn, José. May you never learn."

WITH each abortive search José's anger grew. As the possibilities narrowed he felt like summoning all the villagers together and screaming his wrath and frustration at them. But he held his silence. He gave no evidence of the turmoil within him. Everyplace he searched, he moved with slitted eyes and stern mouth.

The people watched him. He was never without the sensation of covert eyes on his back. The people he faced regarded him silently and fearfully, and spoke only when spoken to. But those hidden eyes never left his back.

Once he thought, why did you send me here, Mr. Merriman? Why did you send me where I was born? Why not Rio Seco? Why not Arrowhead? Damn you, this is my home and these are my people.

He was not aware he was in the schoolhouse until he had crossed the threshold. He pulled up sharply, spurs tinkling. It had slipped his mind that this hut had been turned into a school in the month he had been away. He had heard of it from the riders of Merriman, but he did not realize this was the place until he saw the tables and benches and the books. The children had all been sent home.

Erin Day said, "Hello, Joe. Is there something I can do for you?"

She was seated behind a desk in front of the room. Sunlight through the window fell on her yellow hair, turning it to shining gold. She was smiling, but it was a little smile and somewhat wan.

He started to take his hat off but a sudden spurt of defiance made him leave it there. He started forward, spurs ringing, the gun heavy at his side. He did not know what to say.

"I suppose you're looking for Paul," Erin Day said.

He started to meet her eyes, but when he saw the hurt and fear there he looked away. A poignant loneliness was crying inside him. He could not remember when it had started, but it had not been there before he entered this room.

"Why are you like this, Joe?" Erin Day said. "I've known you for a year and you weren't like this at the beginning. You come from a good family. You have a good mother. Why have you changed?"

It was always rather awkward for him to speak Anglo, although he knew it well. He was always afraid he would make mistakes and people would laugh at him, especially Erin Day, even though she never had.

"I ain't changed," he said. "I just work for Mr. Merriman now, that's all."

"What have you got against Paul?"

"I got nothing against Vincent."

"Why do you hunt him then?"

"He's a troublemaker. He prints dirty lies about Mr. Merriman in his paper." He stopped. He couldn't go on. Damn this English, he thought. If it were Spanish I'd tell you, even if you're a woman.

"Lies?" Erin Day echoed. "Have you ever read them?"

"I don't have to read them."

She opened a drawer of her desk and took out something. He gave one look and then glanced away. "It's all here, Joe, in Paul's paper. Maybe the last one he'll ever publish." Her voice caught and she was silent for a moment. "Why don't you see for yourself? Why don't you read?" She held the paper out toward him.

He hung his head. Shame crawled through his belly. "I don't know how to read. I never learned."

Her breath made an audible sound as she sucked it in. She rose to her feet, came over to him, and put a hand on his arm. He was very aware of her nearness now, of the scent she had about her, of the forlornness crying in his heart.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I didn't stop to think." She paused as though searching for words. "What I'm trying to tell you is that what you're doing is all wrong. For years Merriman has run Dona Luz County. His Chain Link outfit is the biggest ranch. He elects his own sheriff and judge and all other officers through crooked elections. Paul finally got proof of this. With Luis Varga's help he got this proof. Don't you know what Merriman is?"

"I don't know nothing about politics."

"Have you ever voted, Joe? Have the other men ever told you what happens when they vote?"

He shifted his gaze to the window. Wind was stirring the drying leaves of a cottonwood, and he watched this.

"It's the votes of your people that help Merriman. Very few of them know how to read and write. Their ballots are marked for them. A Chain Link rider is always present to be sure there is no trouble. Your people's votes elect Merriman's officers, but they don't mark their ballots. Your people's names are on the election rolls, names of people who are dead as well as the living. It's this proof that Paul has."

HE KEPT his stare on the cottonwood. "I don't know nothing about politics," he said again.

"Oh, Joe, don't you see? Merriman is the worst enemy your people have. He wants to keep you ignorant. That is why there is only one school in the county, and that's in Arrowhead and only Anglos go there. Do you know how I started this school, Joe?"

The cottonwood's leaves still stirred. Through the open window he could hear their soft rustling. He said nothing.

"I don't get any money, Joe. I give freely of my time. Your people feed me and house me, and in exchange I teach their children. Merriman doesn't like this. You know that, don't you? He doesn't want your people's children to learn to read and write. If you could only see them, Joe, so eager to learn. Wouldn't you have liked to have learned?"

"I don't have to know nothing except how to use a gun, and I know how to do that good. I don't have to know nothing else."

"Please, Joe," she said, squeezing his arm. "Merriman won't last forever. When he goes down you'll go with him. Don't you see?"

I see, Erin, he thought. I see you and Vincent together, in Arrowhead, in Rio Seco, in San Onofre, always together.

Aloud he said, "Is Vincent here in the village?"

Her hand withdrew from his arm. Her head dropped so that he could no longer see the look in her eyes. "I don't know where he is."

He turned and started away. She called his name, but his stride did not break or falter. As he crossed the threshold she called his name again. He picked up the lines of the black horse, standing patiently, and moved on to the next hut.

Now that the search was over he did not know whether he should feel exhilaration or disgust. He had not found Vincent. That alone should have provided him with a measure of relief, but it was not so. He was still taut and angry inside, because he had been sure Vincent was in San Onofre. Everything had pointed to that—Erin Day, Santiago, his mother.

His mother . . .

He vaulted into the saddle and sent the black horse at a gallop toward his mother's house. She heard the hard, hurried sound of this and came out, padding on large, bare feet. He leaped to the ground. One look at his face, and she knew.

"José," she cried, planting herself in front of him, spreading her arms and moving with him to keep him from going around her. "José, no."

He drew his pistol. "Go back in the house."

"What are you going to do?"

"I have searched all of San Onofre, all the houses and sheds but one. You thought to trick me, did you not?"

"He is not here, José. I swear he is not. Your own mother swears he is not."

"Then it will do no harm for me to look."

She would not let him pass. She threw her arms around him and held him. "No, José, no."

Anger blazed in him. With his left hand he broke her hold and thrust her aside. She tripped and went sprawling on the ground. She began to weep.

"My son, my son."

But he was gone. His spurs rang angrily as he walked around the hut and came to a stop in front of the shed where the goats were kept at night. Even from outside he could smell the place. It made him remember the many times he had cleaned out the maure, and how he had hated the task. This and all the other things set him to trembling with wrath.

"Vincent," he shouted. In his rage he forgot to speak the Anglo. "Cobarde, Piece of excrement, come out. Come out before I drag you out."

THE four horsemen came in from the east and rode abreast down the lone street of San Onofre. The lowering sun kept winking off the silver badge one of them wore on his vest. The clopping of the horses' hoofs rang loud and distinct. In front of the cantina of Santiago they pulled up in a line beside the black horse standing there, switching his tail. The riders dismounted.

Two of them stayed beside the horses. The other two walked over to Gomez, who stood with his back to the wall of the cantina.

"Any luck, Joe?" one of them asked.

"No, Mr. Merriman. I looked in every house and shed. He ain't here."

Gray eyes hardened. Thin lips under a brown mustache drew in at the corners. The voice, however, remained soft. "We got a tip he was seen heading here, Joe."

"He ain't in San Onofre, Mr. Merriman."

One of the horses coughed and stamped a foot fretfully. Eyes were watching, many eyes, from all parts of the village.

"I looked real good, Mr. Merriman."

Crabtree, who wore the sheriff's badge, said exasperatedly, "I always told you not to trust a greaser, Walt."

"Take a look," Merriman said. "You and the boys take a look."

Crabtree turned quickly and, with a jerk of the hand, summoned the other two. They went off together, spurs jingling, boots stirring up tiny spurts of dust in the dry street. Merriman took out a cigar, bit off the end, and struck a match. He sucked deeply on the cigar and let the smoke come out slowly through his teeth. All the while he did not look at Gomez.

Gomez shifted his weight to his other foot. The pistol hung heavily in the holster by his right hand. Sweat lined the palm of that hand.

"Crabtree ain't gonna find anything, Mr. Merriman. I looked real hard. Don't you believe me?"

Another eddy of fine blue smoke swirled

ACCOMMODATING COWBOY

By S. OMAR BARKER

The cowpuncher's life is a simple one,

He spends all his time on a horse—

Except when some miss needs a good cowboy kiss,

He'll get off to help her, of course!

---

up in front of Merriman's face. The gray eyes stayed as hard and opaque as agates.

"Don't you trust me, Mr. Merriman? Don't you remember Contreras?"

"Contreras?" Merriman echoed. "Ah, yes, Contreras." He cleared his throat. The gray eyes shifted slightly and speared Gomez. "I like to do favors, Joe, and when I do them I expect favors in return. I did you a favor with Contreras. I expect you never to forget that."

"Favor, Mr. Merriman? Contreras tried to kill you, but I got him before he did."

"Kill *me*? You've got the creek muddied there, Joe."

"I don't know what you mean."

Merriman cleared his throat again. "Crabtree has a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Elfego Contreras, Joe. The only reason he hasn't served it is because I haven't let him. You've been valuable to me. You've done well the six months you've worked for me. I expect you to keep on doing well."

Gomez ran his tongue over dry lips. In his stomach a sick sensation had started. "I didn't murder Contreras, Mr. Merriman. I killed him because he was trying to kill you."

"Are you calling me a liar, Joe?" Merriman got his throat cleared again. "I can produce witnesses who will swear in court that you and Elfego Contreras were old enemies. That would not sound so good, would it, Joe, especially in front of Judge Harper? You know Harper, don't you? He likes to sentence murderers to hang."

Damn you, I know Harper, Gomez thought. You and he are just like that. He quit thinking. Already he could feel a constricting pressure about his neck.

"We understand each other then?" Merriman went on. "I helped you with Contreras. You help me with Vincent. Isn't that fair enough?"

"Yes, Mr. Merriman."

"Good. You're a fine boy, Joe. You'll go far with me. But first, of course, we must take care of Vincent. He could spoil everything for everybody."

"Vincent ain't in San Onofre."

"I believe you, Joe, but you know Crabtree. He has to see for himself."

The wind had picked up force. It moaned softly as it swept around the huts and sheds, and stirred whirling eddies of dust in the street. Shadows lengthened as the sun sank toward the crests of the Capitans.

Merriman finished his cigar and lit another. He stood there, impassive to the wind, gray eyes hard and staring off at something only he could see. Gomez leaned against the wall of the cantina, resting his weight first on one foot and then the other. The taste of ashes was in his mouth.

The sun was down behind the Capitans when Crabtree returned. There was a truculent air about his tall, thin shape. Yellow eyes glittered as they studied Gomez.

"Can't find hide or hair of him, Walt," Crabtree said, "but that doesn't mean he hasn't been here."

"Maybe he'll show up tonight," Merriman said. "We'll leave Joe here to take care of him if he does."

"I don't trust Joe," Crabtree said. "I don't trust any greaser. I don't know why the hell you had to go and hire one."

"Now, now, Ed," Merriman said, softly chiding. "The Mexicans are my friends and I am one of theirs. What better way to prove it than to give Joe a job? He's a good boy. He won't let us down, will you, Joe?"

"No, Mr. Merriman."

Merriman walked over and mounted his coyote dun. He swung the horse over close to Gomez and sat in the saddle, looking down. "If Vincent comes I want every paper he's got on him. Understand, Joe? Every single scrap of paper. I don't want you to give those papers to any one but me. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mr. Merriman."

"Good." Merriman swung the dun back around and touched it with a spur. Over his shoulder he said, "Remember Contreras, Joe. Remember him."

SHE came to him as he sat on the bench in front of his mother's hut, arms on his thighs, staring at the ground. The black horse, standing ground-hitched, snorted, and Gomez glanced up and saw her.

The wind swirled the long length of her blond hair, which she wore tied at the nape of her neck and dangling down her back. The wind molded her dress to the fine shape of

her body, then billowed the cloth away. Even in the thickening shadows he could discern the distress on her face.

"What are we going to do now, Joe?"

"I don't know."

"Will they be back?"

"Of course."

"Do you think they'll search the thickets along the creek next time?"

"They'll search every inch of the country."

She let out a moan and then lifted a hand and bit down on the knuckles. After a while, she said, "If we could only get him out of the county! Can't you do that, Joe?"

"How? Every way out is blocked. He can't go east, north or south. It would take all night and tomorrow. The closest place is the pass in the Capitans, but you can bet Merriman's got that blocked.

She dropped her head and began to cry, silently.

"Do you love him, Erin?"

"I'm not sure. I know I like him very much, and he keeps asking me to marry him, but before I do a thing like that I want to be sure, very sure. But even if I didn't love him, if I didn't like him, I still wouldn't want to see him die."

She was crying audibly now.

He rose to his feet and put an awkward arm around her shoulders. For a moment he couldn't speak. Then he said, "Don't cry, Erin. When you cry, I— Don't cry."

Later he rode up into the mountains. He first saw the winking of the fire from far away. It's the narrowest part of the pass, he thought, the part where no one can get through. I wonder how many there are? He urged the black horse on. The fire grew larger and brighter. He could see it flickering in the wind that was very strong up here on the mountain.

"Wait here," he said softly to Vincent, and rode on alone.

There were only two, he saw, with a measure of relief—Ryan and Greely. A shod hoof rang against a stone, and Ryan and Greeley jumped to their feet. Both had Winchesters cocked and ready in their hands.

"Who's there?" Ryan shouted.

He rode in boldly. It was his only chance, for he did not dare arouse their suspicions.

"What do you want?" Ryan asked, as Gomez rode into the circle of firelight. Ryan's rifle sagged, and so did Greeley's.

"This," said Gomez, whipping out his pistol.

He shot Ryan in the chest, and the man went down with an anguished groan. Greely got his rifle up, but not in time to aim. Gomez shot him in the arm, and Greeley's rifle blasted, but the barrel was tipped up at the sky. Gomez would have fired again, but Greeley dropped the rifle and lifted high his one good arm.

Toward morning he lay on his bed in the darkness, waiting. They would come. It was inevitable that they would. The wind would have carried the sound of the shots a long way, and so they would come.

He held the pistol in his hand. He had inserted a cartridge in the sixth chamber which he habitually carried empty under the hammer. Now the pistol was in his hand and ready, and so he waited.

The sound came quite abruptly. Someone started banging on the door. He swung his legs swiftly over the edge of the bed and came up on his feet, the pistol cocked in his hand. He would have fired, but the voice came then.

"Joe, Joe. It's me, Erin."

He crossed to the door and flung it open. Anger and something else which he could not define swirled in him. "What're you doing here? Beat it."

"No." She pushed past him, shut the door, and leaned against it. He could hear the hard, fast sound of her breathing. "Your mother came and told me you'd returned. She said you chased her out of the house and told her to stay away. Why did you come back, Joe?"

"Didn't my mother tell you Vincent is all right?"

"Yes, Joe, but why didn't you go with him? Why did you come back here?"

"This is my home. I was born in this house."

She drew a ragged, moaning breath. "You were born here, so you want to die here. Is that it?"

HE SAID nothing. He peered at the window, but it was still dark outside. However, it did not matter. Dark or daylight, it made little difference.

"Why don't you want to live, Joe?"

"I got no choice. Contreras."

"Contreras?"

"Mr. Merriman told me yesterday. If I doublecrossed him he would have Crabtree arrest me for the murder of Contreras. He said he would have witnesses who would swear it was murder."

"Then why did you come back? Why didn't you go with Paul?"

"I'd still be wanted in Dona Luz County. I'd be hunted all over the Territory. If they caught me they'd send me back."

"But Paul would have fixed all that. He's going to the governor with proof of what Merriman is. It's only a matter of time before Merriman is through. Oh, Joe, why did you come back?"

He said nothing. The wind was still crying and he listened to it. It fitted in well with the way he felt inside.

She was silent a while, thinking. When she spoke, her voice was small and tremulous. "Do you remember the first time we met, Joe, at that baile in Arrowhead about a year ago? You kept looking at me, but you wouldn't ask me for a dance because you weren't an Anglo. As if that were something to be ashamed of, when your people had settled here two hundred years before the Anglos came! So I asked you for a dance. Remember?"

I remember, Erin. How well I remember. I'll remember all the way to my grave.

She came up and put her hands on his arms. There was something sweet and tender in the way they rested there. "You've always been like that with me, Joe. You've never once said what you think of me."

No, Erin, and I never will.

"You don't have to tell me, Joe. I know now. I know now why you helped Paul, why you came back, why you don't want to live. But *I* want you to. Will you, Joe? Will you leave now while there's still time? For me?"

He heard the sounds before she did. "There's no longer any time," he said.

She let out a small cry and tensed and stood there with him, both of them listening to the sounds of horses moving into San Onofre.

"Maybe they'll ride on through," she whispered. "Maybe they won't stop."

"They'll see my horse behind the house."

He glanced again at the window. The darkness was not so deep any more. The gray of dawn was on the way. Outside, the horses moved, hoofs clopping, bit chains tinkling, saddle leather squealing faintly as they circled the house and the shed.

"I never learned nothing, not even how to write my name, only how to use a gun. Even though I've killed a man, even though I'll try to kill again, I'm not a killer. Will you believe that, Erin? At the pass I could have killed both Ryan and Greeley. Maybe if I had— But I'm not a killer. Do you believe me?"

"I believe you, Joe."

Outside, Crabtree started to shout. "Greaser, we know you're in there. Come out greaser."

He took her hands one by one and removed them gently from his arms. For a moment he placed a hand on her head.

"Does it have to be now, Joe?"

"It's starting to get daylight. The lighter it gets the smaller chance I'll have."

She began to cry softly.

"Please don't cry, Erin. Don't let me remember you the last time crying."

Outside Crabtree shouted, "Cobarde. Hijo de puto. Come on out, greaser."

"I'll do my best, Erin. I know how to use a gun good and I'll do my best. Tell my mother—" He did not finish.

"Tell her what, Joe?"

"Nothing."

He wanted to tell Erin good-by but there was something too final in the words. They choked in his throat. So he touched her head again, the golden hair, and then he was throwing the door open and running out.

It was only light enough to see dimly, but he saw them there ahead of him, Crabtree and Merriman. There were others to his right and left, but he looked only at Crabtree and Merriman.

CRABTREE was the first to notice him coming out the door. He started to shout an alarm. Gomez shot him in the stomach, and Crabtree's shout changed into a scream and he went down. Gomez fired at Merriman, but just as his finger squeezed the trigger something fierce and hard and hot hit

him. The next thing he knew he was flat on the ground, trying not to mind the pain, trying to blink the shadows from in front of his eyes so that he might see.

There was pain and more pain and more and in his ears a thunder that was the roaring of several guns. Ahead of him Merriman stood, gun blazing in his hand.

Gomez aimed his pistol. Shoot well, gun. Shoot like I have trained thee to shoot. Shoot well just once more.

The recoil almost knocked the pistol from his hand. His eyes began to blur and he almost wept, he wanted so much to see. Then the reeling world steadied for a moment and the mist lifted from his eyes. He saw Merriman teetering like a tall pine before making a sudden swift fall. He hit the earth and lay very still.

A great, terrifying blackness came out of nowhere and rushed down on Gomez. Now he knew nothing but this, the imminence of death. With what he was sure would be his last breath he gasped, "Erin, querida. Erin."

A long time later he emerged from the drowsy world of pain, and for a while he lay staring straight upward. He was conscious of the murmur of voices and of someone going, and shortly afterward of someone coming. He did not know who it was until the lips brushed his and teardrops touched his face.

"Joe, Joe," Erin Day said. "You're going to be all right. It's been so long, but now you're going to be all right."

He was thinking of those last terrible, pain-racked moments. "Merriman?" he whispered.

"Merriman's dead. So is Crabtree. When they fell the others stampeded. It's all over now, Joe. Paul has seen the governor. There's a new sheriff and a new judge and a new prosecutor—honest men, Joe."

"How is Vincent?"

"He's all right." There was a pause. Then she said, "I told Paul I would never marry him. There's only one man I'll ever marry, and if he won't have me then I won't marry at all."

"I never learned nothing. I don't know how to read or write. I can't even make my own name."

"I can teach you. I'm a teacher, remember? I would like to teach you for the rest of my life. Will you let me?"

Something filled his eyes, something like tears, and he could not understand this because he had never been so happy.

"You bet, Erin," he said. "You bet your life I'll let you."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

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Featuring a Review of COLUMBIA'S

MY GUN COMMANDS

with RANDOLPH SCOTT *and* ANGELA LANSBURY

PLUS

A WORD-AND-PICTURE PERSONALITY SKETCH OF

GARY COOPER

PAY PEYTON COULD stop a stage hold-up by turning his brother over to the law . . . and risking the life of the girl he loved

WHEN they came out of the broken hills on the Cheyenne Trail, the day was about shot. Eastward the prairie ran along, hazed and dim, till it was lost in the fading heat. Looking the other way, Pay Peyton could see the first slopes of the shining mountains. The trail in from deadwood had been easy to ride. Already it was worn deep by bull and mule trains heading for the Black Hills. They'd made good time, but they still weren't more than halfway to the railroad. He wondered how far they'd get before they stopped.

A springside patch of trees rose before them, and Beau reined in his horse. "Time for another drink," he announced, and Pay knew he didn't mean it would be spring water.

Pay looked at his brother with amiable annoyance. "You'll have your big time over with before we even hit town."

"Fun is never over, kid," Beau said, and laughed.

He was down on the ground, rummaging in a saddle pocket. Being a little the older, he was lead horse in their team. There was never any use opposing him, but that didn't matter much. Beau had bought his bottle back at Rawhide Buttes, and had nursed it like a calf long gone from its mother ever since. He

Decision at

Three Mile

By GIFF CHESHIRE

was unsteady already, as he got out the bottle and pulled the cork with his strong white teeth. He took a good pull.

Pay glanced around. This was better-looking country, now that they were near the Platte. But it was as windy as it had been up on the Belle Fourche, where they'd ridden since the previous fall for old Chan Scott's Bar S. The draft fluttered his hat brim and the sides of his thin new shirt. It already carried the cool of evening. Pay thought this would be a good place to make camp. He wanted to. Beau would be tighter than a tick before long.

Pay got a drink at the spring. When he'd rolled a cigarette, he stood watching the eastward flow of the land. A man would never realize it was falling, although it dropped all the way down to the Big Muddy. In the other direction, and running south, were the Laramies. This was high country, fierce, fine, and fruitful for those who'd come to make it their home. He'd thought he could call it his home, too, but once more Beau had proved him wrong.

"We'll have one long string of big times;" Beau was saying, his voice thicker already. "We're going where the snow doesn't pile up so high a man can't walk." He held out the bottle and used the back of his hand to wipe his mouth. The whisky was singing loud in him.

He was a slender, high-stacked man whose nerves had been created too tight. He had a touchy temper and speedily became impatient with any place he happened to be. He was looking around now, frowning, ready to travel. He walked back along the road, wheeled, and returned. He'd been the same keyed-up way all along, coming down from the Belle Fourche.

Excitement danced brightly in the squinted glance he lifted to Pay. "You're damned right we'll have fun. No more of old Chan Scott's guff for me and you, either. I hated that buzzard's guts."

"He was a tough turkey, sure enough," Pay agreed. "But maybe a man has to be a bronco-brain to stay in the cow business."

He'd had all the drink he wanted at the spring, but Beau never cared to tip a bottle by himself. So Pay took a mouthful of whisky, washed it around to cut the dust, and swallowed it. He put the cork back in the bottle, which he handed over.

Beau started to pull the cork again, then changed his mind and stowed the bottle away. He took a last drag on his cigarette, dropped it to the dust, and ground it out with the toe of a worn boot, noisily expelling smoke from his mouth.

Pay said, "We going to lay over at the fort tonight?"

"Not us. We'll go on to Three Mile. I hanker to lay my hands on an accommodating woman."

"Suits me," Pay agreed, although it didn't. Three Mile was what this country called a hog ranch, one of the many places sprung up on the edges of the military reservations. They did a rush business chiseling money from the soldiers, cowpunchers, and general itinerants. Three Mile was the kind of layout where Beau could get them into plenty of trouble. Pay would get in trobule too because, in the pinches, he always sided Beau.

Pay noticed that Beau took another searching look backward before he went up to the saddle, as if he expected to see somebody appear. But nothing followed them that Pay knew about, and nothing showed now but the hazed roughness of the country itself.

On a few miles lay Fort Laramie, toward which they continued at a steady gait. The trail now ran over prairie swells, sweeping flats, and scarred rocks. They came into the river valley, clattered over the new iron bridge, and afterward passed the cluttered buildings of the fort.

Three miles down the Laramie river, and just off the military reserve, lay the hog ranch. Its lights blinked in the gathering dusk and steadily grew brighter. Beau moved in the saddle, excitement again stirring his face. His horse seemed to catch it and quickened its gait.

BEAU shouted, "Come on, Pay!" and dug steel into the flanks of the beast. As they pelted onto the settlement's one dusty street, he let out a wild Comanche yell. Pay's mount ran instinctively beside

Beau's. Horses at the hitch-posts swung nervously and jerked on their tie lines as the newcomers burned by. A man tramping along the road jumped out of the way and cursed them heartily. They slowed up in a roll of dust.

Pay didn't see any livery stable, but there was a high-walled sod corral. He made out a bunkhouse and a clutter of other buildings, the main one a store, before which they swung down.

"Now for a real drink," Beau said. "Man told me they have ice."

"Reckon I don't need another just now," Pay said. But he didn't dare to add that Beau didn't either.

Beau left him, thumping across the store porch and going in, a stringy man slim at the hips and wedging out to wide shoulders. His legs showed the bowing effect of riding since boyhood. His walk was quick and restless.

There were other ways in which the Peyton boys were not alike at all, although they'd ridden the same trail for a lifetime. Pay was the heavier and had a genial face, a ready amiability. His eyes were gray, steady, and his thatch of black hair long had needed the work of a barber. His mouth lacked the stubbornness of Beau's, the whole look of his face showing instead an easy patience.

The bar was in the store, and Pay knew Beau would stay there until he'd drunk enough to satisfy himself. So Pay went into the stage station for his supper. There were a few punchers ahead of him, drifted in from the scattered cattle ranges. There were others whose clothes showed them to be hill men, coming and going between the mines and the railroad. Pay knew none of them, and sat quietly while he waited for his supper. When it came, he ate it with a healthy young appetite.

When he walked out onto the stage road, which was Three Mile's one street, he was rolling a smoke. He felt relaxed now, and was lighting the cigarette lazily when he saw that the Cheyenne stage was whirling in from the south. Moving over against the building, he watched with detached interest.

The Concord whipped up before the eating house, covered with dust, its horses still full of ginger and preferring to travel. There was a man on the box with the driver, but Pay only glanced briefly at those two. Three or four other men had piled out of the coach and rushed for the door of the eating house. But the last one paused, turned to look back, and lifted a hand.

Pay saw another hand and arm emerge. A girl appeared, hesitant about trusting her weight to the dinky iron step and the long drop between it and the dust. When she'd risked it, she stood swaying a little, supporting herself by the handle of the coach.

She nodded reserved thanks to the gallant, who then turned and hurried in to get his supper. The girl waited there a moment longer, looking about. Her cheeks were flushed. Pay thought there was something in her that was close to plain distress, but the light wasn't good.

He couldn't blame her if she were disconcerted by this roadside fleshpot. Maybe she didn't know what they were, but he saw her glance briefly toward the row of shacks that were occupied by the soiled doves, over a dozen of them.

As she moved over, the light of the eating house came more fully on her, and Pay again saw the disturbed look on her face. Now he also could see her beauty. For a moment she was a vivid impact on his mind, like no other woman had ever been. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth, still watching as she stepped on, unaware of him, into the station. Long after she had vanished, the image she'd made was full and vivid in his eyes.

He was still there, waiting for another look at her, when the passengers came out. He was surprised and puzzled when she did not appear. The driver hustled his passengers aboard, sprang to the box, and the teams charged north. Pay had a sour grin on his mouth. This was man's country through here. Except for the wives of a few station tenders, women came for but one purpose. He'd never have believed it of this one, but she'd stayed here.

When he stepped past the window and looked in, he saw her again. She was still at the room's one table, but not eating, just waiting there and hardly moving a muscle.

She looked lost, scared, and something more. She still looked sick. A man who was clearing the table gave her a puzled look, but said nothing.

Pay didn't know what impulse took him back through that door, beyond a suspicion that she needed help. He pulled off his hat as he came up. Hooking the chair next to her around with his foot, and sat down, a rough man but obviously concerned about her.

He said, "You don't feel so good, do you?"

SHE looked at him, frowning at first. But his open countenance and the respect in his face reassured her. She shook her head. "Nothing serious. I'm just sick from all the swaying. I'll be all right pretty soon."

"You ought to have gone on to Fort Laramie to lay over," he told her. "It's only about three miles more."

"That's what the driver said," she answered, "but I couldn't. I'll be all right here, and by tomorrow's stage I'm sure I can go on."

"How far'll it be?"

"To Deadwood. My father's in business there."

"Well, if I can do anything, I'll be around till morning."

"Thank you," she said. "I'm Cornelia Gay."

"They call me Pay Peyton."

"Would you know my father?"

"There's a Gay's store in Deadwood."

"That's it," she said, pleased that this established some kind of an acquaintance between them, she was that frightened and lonely.

He was sure she'd finally figured out the nature of this road ranch, and he thought she felt better about her situation with him on hand. He sure felt a lot better about her, knowing now why she'd come here.

He put his horse in the corral for the night, ordering it a feed of grain, and wondering what had become of Beau. Afterward he went over to the bunkhouse with his bed. He found a bunk for himself, and left the soogans on it.

He wondered if Cornela Gay would take it amiss if he suggested that they ride on to the fort that night, as soon as she'd recovered a little. He didn't blame her for being stage sick. A lot of women and more children came down with that malady as the swaying Concords barreled over the rough roads.

He looked over the settlement with mounting detachment, as he wondered and worried about the girl. It had a billiard hall, and a dance place where the trollops did their spade work. Both places, like the bar in the store, had filled up, growing noisy as soldiers on pass from the fort came in to join the throng. Pay had a drink at the crowded bar and was nursing it, when somebody touched his shoulder. He swung around and saw Beau.

"What've you been doing with yourself?" Beau asked. He sounded a lot drunker than he'd been when they hit the place.

Pay grinned at him. "No need to ask what you've been doing. Man, it's running out your ears."

"Come on," Beau said. "There's somebody over in the cribs I want you to talk to."

"Not me," Pay said. "I don't hanker to buy my company."

"This isn't so pleasant, but it might be more profitable."

Pay went out with Beau into a street now crowded and rowdy. Beau knew where he was heading, and went to the log hut farthest on the right. Pay followed him inside, but saw no woman. A man sat on the edge of the bed. He had a water glass of whisky in his hand, and there was a bottle on the table. Pay pulled up, staring hard.

"Doc Richie!" he breathed. "What the blue blazes brought you down here?"

Richie was a squat man with long, mousy hair, who had been the foreman of Bar S. He grinned at Pay. "Figured you'd put me in your misspent past, didn't you, Pay? I just came in. Tomorrow I have to meet old Chan Scott at Fort Laramie, when he comes in on the Cheyenne stage. I'm riding home with the old cuss."

"How come he got so fond of your company?" Pay asked.

They all grinned, because Scott seemed to detest the men who worked for him. Anyway, that's how they all felt.

"It happens," Richie explained, "that the old coot'll be packing heap big dinero to pay for that Texas herd he's having delivered to the ranch. The people he deals with want cash on the barrel head. So Chan had to shag clean down to Cheyenne to get it. He's carrying around thirty thousand dollars, he told me. He wants me to ride gun guard for him through the outlaw country, and I can't say I blame him."

Pay shrugged, not seeing yet what that could have to do with him and Beau. But he saw that both men regarded him with a close and curious intensity, a heat in their faces that seemed to come from more than whisky. Then suddenly he had a deep and disturbing suspicion.

He must have showed it, for Beau said in rising excitement, "It's fool-proof, kid. We have it all mapped out."

"So you figure on taking over that money."

"Somewhere short of the Cheyenne River," Richie said. "And it'll be like shooting fish in a barrel. All you and Beau have to do is stop the stage and make it look like a real outside stick-up. I'll be inside to handle Chan."

"All Beau and I got to do," Pay drawled, "is ride on down to Cheyenne the way we're heading. You boys are making whisky talk, but I'm cold sober. Cut it out before you talk yourselves into real trouble."

Beau's dismissing hand shut him up. Beau had taken it for granted that he'd have his way in this, as he'd always had in their planning. Pay took a long drag on his cigarette.

Softly he repeated, "Not us, Beau. We're pulling out in the morning."

PAY saw Beau's eye muscles tighten, and he saw stubborn temper rise in the unruly eye. "We pull out in the morning, sure enough. And in time we get to Cheyenne. But in between we cut a circle back north. We're going to stop the stage at that ford, past the Running Water. We stopped there before, remember? And I picked that for the place."

Pay's face grew red. He'd hoped it was whisky doing the planning, but now he knew different. Beau had watched the backtrail all the way down, knowing Richie wasn't far behind. He'd picked the place for the stick-up, and he'd been sober then. So the thing had been planned before they even left Bar S. It was why Beau had been so anxious for them to throw up good winter jobs and head south all of a sudden. So it wasn't whisky talk, and no amount of his own talking would do any good.

"What are we supposed to get out of it?" he asked.

"A third apiece. That's twenty thousand for you and me."

"Then what?"

"Then," Beau said, "you and I keep going south. We've built up to that by the talk we made at the ranch about hunting up a warmer climate for the winter. We aren't supposed to know what Chan Scott went down to Cheyenne for. We try to pull the stickup so as to leave Doc in the clear, too. It'll look like owlhoot work, and the three of us will be sitting pretty."

"More'n one man's used as good a plan," Pay snapped, "and wound up on the end of a rope. Old Chan's a hard man to fool. We all learned that."

"Old Chan," Richie said bitterly, "might not live through it. If you think it's tough riding for him, you ought to have been his ramrod a spell. Any passengers that object or look like they're thinking too much may not live through it either. Why not? The whole thing'll be charged to Dunc Blackburn or one of those other back-country lobos."

Pay thought that even Beau stiffened at hearing that cold-blooded threat. That gave him hope. Beau might go in for something that would even scores with Chan Scott and enrichen his own purse, but he'd draw the line at murder. Richie was getting a skinful, and it had loosened his tongue. Beau for the first time was getting a real look into the man's mind.

Richie seemed to realize he'd said too much. With a light shrug, he added, "But there won't be any trouble. There's no shotgun guard on the up trips, and sometimes not many passengers. I figure on standing there and letting you old boys take my measly wad, along with Chan's big one."

But Pay wasn't fooled. In that moment while Doc's guard was down, he'd said what he would do if something slipped.

Pay said, "Don't play the fool, Beau," and swung about and walked out.

He tramped slowly along the road, so much on his mind that he didn't notice a thing until he saw Cornelia Gay standing in uncertainty in front of the eating house. The settlement had grown fully boisterous by then, men's laughter and loud, crude talk racketing about.

She gave a start and then, recognizing him, said forlornly, "The man wanted to close his place up, and I don't know where to go."

"Maybe you'll think me fresh," Pay said, "but if you feel well enough to let me ride with you to Fort Laramie. They have a good hotel there where you can rest and wait over in privacy."

"I feel much better. Can you get me a horse?"

"Not with a sidesaddle."

"That won't matter much in the dark."

He got his own horse from the corral and hired another for her, pleased that she put so much trust in him. He didn't bother to tell Beau where he was going. Cornelia had let her luggage go on with the stage, she said. Within minutes they were mounted and riding north.

The stars were out in full blaze. The scent of the sage rode on the wind, a sudden clean goodness. There was relief in Cornelia's voice when she spoke again.

"Am I taking you out of your way?"

"Not much," he told her. "We're heading south and in no hurry about it. I don't mind getting away from Three Mile, myself."

"Pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Must seem so to a lady. But it's not much different from lots of places in these parts. Maybe they're what you'd call a necessary nuisance. We don't have many women out here, so things get right down to brass tacks. You'll find Deadwood better, but even that's no flower garden."

"I think I'll like it, from what my father's written."

He wished she'd showed up sooner. Not that he'd gotten down to Deadwood very often from Bar S, which was farther north. But this was a girl a man would ride over a lot of hills and across a lot of prairies to see. Her voice had the power to stir Pay strongly and deeply. Every time he looked at her he felt a lift of his spirits and a wanting of vague things unknown to his conscious mind.

"You're leaving because you don't like the country?" she asked.

"Just itchy-footed, I reckon."

He wished he could make it plain that this restlessness was all Beau's, that he went along only because they were brothers and good saddlemates.

THE ride to Fort Laramie was all too short. He took her to the hotel and waited to make sure she was accommodated. She thanked him quietly, saying, "I feel fine now. Don't worry about me any more. Thanks, and good luck on that long trail."

"It was pure pleasure, ma'am," he told her. Touching his hat, he went out to his horse.

There was a feeling of emptiness in him as he rode south alone, a sense of putting something behind he'd never find again. He was a rough man, untutored except in the hard way of experience. Yet Cornelia Gay had struck him as being like so many of the women who came to the frontier, themselves gentle and refined, but ready to accept the crude environment they found and adapt themselves to it.

Beau was waiting in the bunkhouse when Pay got back to Three Mile. His face wore a tough blackness, and he said, "Where'd you ride to this time of night?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but I went to Fort Laramie."

"Why?"

"That's none of your business, either. But it happens a girl came in on the stage, was going to lay over here, and then changed her mind. I offered to take her on to Laramie, and she took me up on it. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Beau said, "if you stayed away from the telegraph office there."

"Why, damn you. Doc Richie might be willing to turn traitor on old Scott, but that's something I haven't gone in for yet. I wouldn't tell on Doc, and much less on you."

"And see that you don't."

For a moment they stared at each other in bright and brittle anger, something lost between them, gone forever. Beau seemed to realize that his day in the driver's seat was behind, and he looked baffled and bitter when he swung and walked out. Pay spread his blankets on an empty bunk. The other bunks had been appropriated, as proved by the bed rolls lying on them, but the claimants were still out enjoying the pleasures of the place. Pulling off his boots and dropping his hat on top of them, Pay crawled in.

His last thoughts were of Cornelia Gay as he had seen her stepping down from the stage. She had touched some deep frustration in him that was older than his present worry for Beau. It was the desire, he realized suddenly, for many things that Beau had kept him from having.

It seemed to him that he had hardly slept when he was awakened by someone shaking him. He opened his eyes to look up into the stern face of Beau, dark with animosity in the breaking light. The snores of men in the bunks about came to his ears. Morning had come, and with it the decision.

Beau said in a whisper, "Get dressed. It's time to ride."

"Where's Richie?"

"He's in one of the other bunkhouses. We don't have to see him again. Hustle, kid."

"I'm not going with you, Beau, except to Cheyenne."

Beau was sober now, but even more ill-tempered than he had been the night before. He said, "Come on outside. We can't argue that out in here."

Pay took his time about pulling on his boots and setting his hat on his shaggy head. When he went outdoors, Beau was waiting at the corral gate. He had both their horses saddled and ready, sure he could dominate the situation again, that only his drunkenness had made him fumble and slip last night. He took a quick look about, but nobody was close enough to hear him.

He said, "You fool, we'll never get another chance like Richie's offered."

"Which is one more than I wish we'd gotten, Beau. You heard what he threatened to do to old Scott, and to any passenger who made trouble. I thought that had turned your stomach."

"It wasn't anything but drunk talk."

"Which is the kind that can tip a man's hand."

"Nobody's going to get hurt," Beau said scornfully. "I made that plan to Doc after you left. He won't do a thing unless you and I can't handle it. In that case, he'll only take a hand to help us get back on top. If it can't be done without shooting, you and I will clear out and ride."

"He agreed?"

"He had to."

"If he wouldn't till he had to, it's no agreement."

Beau's eyes had gone bleak. "If we split, kid, we'll be taking different trails from here on."

"I reckon I know that, Beau. It's your say."

Beau looked at him through a bitter moment. There was loyalty in his face, a certain regret. Yet deeper than that lay the wildness of his nature, aroused by Richie and the quick riches he promised. With a quick swing, Beau turned to his horse and mounted. He didn't even look back as he rode out alone.

An unbearable loneliness rose in Pay as he watched. Memories rushed back, bright and never to be forgotten, out of their boyhood together. Yet he knew now that all along this day had been in the cards. It had been only a question of time until Beau would be tempted by the big chance. That had come, and Beau was ready.

AS SOON as the eating house was open, Pay went in and had his breakfast. He had just stepped out of the place when he saw Doc Richie emerge from one of the bunkhouses. Pay halted and stood rolling a smoke to cover the jitters that had been in him since Beau had pulled out. He felt this flatten into hostility when, out of

the corner of his eye, he saw Richie observe him and come walking forward through the dust.

Pay half looked at him as the man came up, seeing a face flushed and heavy from the effects of carousing, seeing the enmity in the slate-colored eyes. Richie stood there for a full minute, aware of the truculence in Pay and returning it.

"So you're chicken," he said at last. He smiled, bunching the folds of his cheeks until they stretched with malice on the sides of his mouth. "What got into you? Beau guaranteed you'd come along before I agreed to let you in on it."

"Beau was wrong twice—first in figuring I would go along, and again when he took it for granted he'd always be lead horse. I didn't want to quit Bar S, or most of the jobs we had before that."

"Maybe," Richie said in a slow, thin voice, "you see a way to fix yourself up real good with old man Scott."

"I hadn't thought of it, but that might be a good idea."

The anger in Richie became wild and uncontrollable then. He growled, "Keep your mouth shut, kid, and your hands out of it. Pay, I'm telling you."

Pay got his horse and knew Richie was watching closely when he rode out, heading back north. He had no plan at all, nor any hope that Richie had been rendered sufficiently uncertain of what he would do to call off the scheme. Richie knew that blood was thicker than water. From his own experience, back on Bar S, he'd learned that Pay would never do anything to harm his brother. Richie would bank on that loyalty even yet.

Fort Laramie was astir when Pay rode in, although the hour was still early. He put up his horse at the livery and went to the hotel where he'd left Cornellie Gay the night before. He had a day to kill, waiting for the evening stage. He didn't mean to make himself conspicuous in the meantime.

Once in the hotel room, he found himself too restless to stretch out and sleep again. But he pulled off his boots and lay down on the bed. There was a sickness in his stomach, and he was thinking of Cornelia, who meant to be on that same stage when it pulled out of here. He knew her hardly at all, actually, and he had no reason to hope he'd ever know her better. But she was one of his reasons for not going ahead with whatever Beau compelled him to do.

He slept finally, and was aroused by the day's full heat. He awakened moist with sweat and rose from the bed, instantly keyed up and impatient to get on with it. When he had tugged on his boots, he washed his hot face at the stand, then combed his hair. Afterward he rolled a cigarette and smoked it thoughtfully. Then he put on his hat and went out.

Cornelia was seated in a round-backed chair on the hotel porch, looking fit and easy again. She recognized him instantly and in visible surprise.

"Why, hello. I thought you'd be a long way from here by now."

"I changed my mind."

She thought she was responsible for that, seemed both pleased and distressed that, as it appeared, he was still keeping an eye on her. He wished he dared to tell her his real reason for being here this time, and ask her to wait for another stage before continuing her own journey. But he couldn't bring himself to incriminate Beau, his own brother. There was an off chance that Chan Scott wouldn't be on the stage that day, anyway. Something might upset his schedule.

She seemed inclined to have him take the chair next to her. But he couldn't do that, either, not when he didn't want to talk about anything much, or even to think. With a quick nod, he left her and went to get himself a meal. When he came back to the hotel she'd left the porch. Maybe he'd been too curt with her, too withdrawn, and she hadn't understood it.

There wasn't much of the day left when the northbound stage rolled in. Pay came out of the hotel, knowing that Cornelia had already gone to the depot. He was leaving a good horse and saddle behind, and had a ticket for Deadwood in his pocket. He reached the stage and experienced a complete dashing of the hopes he'd entertained.

Chan Scott was there, walking around stretching his legs. Doc Richie had come in from Three Mile, and was standing with his employer. He was talking as friendly as if he didn't have murder in the back of his mind. Neither saw Pay. Cornelia had already gotten into the stage, taking the back seat, which faced forward. To make sure he got the one next to her, Pay climbed in.

There was a stunned look on Doc Richie's face when he got in and saw Pay for the first time. He halted on the step, his jaw hinged open. The sickness came back to Pay for an instant. Then Richie got in, taking the seat across, facing Cornelia. He was followed at once by Chan Scott, who sat down beside his ramrod.

SCOTT carried too much weight for Pay to tell if there was a money belt around him with the fortune Richie meant to steal. A gray-haired man who now needed a shave, Scott was chewing on a cigar. He glanced idly at Pay, and then with sudden interest. He'd left for Cheyenne before the Peyton boys had drawn their time.

"What're you doing down here?" Scott rumbled.

"I started south and changed my mind," Pay said. "I see Richie didn't get around to telling you Beau and I pulled stakes."

"If you figure to come back to Bar S," Scott snapped, "they're still pulled. When a man quits me, he quits permanently."

"Suits me," Pay retorted, "since I happen to be going to Deadwood."

Cornelia had listened, although she didn't let on until Pay finished speaking. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her turn her head then and glance at him. Doc Richie had heard him in utter disbelief, and his eyes were still dangerous. The driver came out of the station then, bawling his intentions to depart.

But nobody else got aboard. Pay felt a cold chill. He'd hoped for a full passenger list, figuring it might discourage Richie. But the Indian and outlaw trouble was so bad travel wasn't heavy. Pay knew that this made an ideal set-up for Doc Richie.

He had no hope now that Beau wouldn't be waiting at the ford, and knew at last that there had never been grounds for hope. He stared at Chan Scott, who kept puffing his cigar, silent and surly, with no idea of what was planned. Then the stage lit out for the hills.

Pay sat quietly in his place beside Cornelia, who showed no inclination to talk with him. So he had to figure that he had offended her with his close-mouthed bruskness there on the hotel porch. This depressed him, and as he grew conscious of the steady glare Richie turned on him, he had half a mind to get off at the next station.

He couldn't keep Beau from going bad if Beau were bent on doing it. He surely bore no love for old Chan Scott. But they passed the next station as night closed in, and Pay didn't get off.

Once the stage had rattled over the Platte's iron bridge they were in the danger country. The Sioux still disputed the white man's title to this vast country. Ever since gold dust had started pouring out of the Black Hills, road agents had grown thicker and thicker. But the treasure kept coming, guarded by a shotgun man on the box. Pay sure wished one were up there now.

The Concord tore on through the deepening night, stopping only at lonely stations for a change of horses. At these the passengers could get down only for brief moments to stretch their legs. At each such opportunity, Richie made sure that Pay didn't get in a private word with Scott.

Finally Richie managed to get close enougfih to Pay to speak in private. "So you're being stubborn. All right. Don't figure on any favors just because you're Beau's brother."

Pay only took another drag on his cigarette.

Afterward Cornelia slept, and pretty soon Chan Scott followed suit. Pay's dread of the coming miles began to tear at him. Awake with Richie, he was all too aware that the man had a set-up now for a quick play of his own if he wanted it. Two shots—three if Cornelia made trouble—would clear the way for him, leaving only the driver to be handled. The stageline jehus were tough turkeys, which was why Richie had wanted outside help. He still wanted it, apparently.

Daylight found them at Rawhide Buttes, one of the more pleasant stops. Afterward

the stage kept rattling forward, the country getting rougher, wilder, hotter, the timbered slopes and buttes receding behind. They passed Rawhide Springs and came finally to the breakfast station.

Pay said, "We eat here, Miss Gay, if you're able."

"I'm feeling fine this time."

"Want to come with me."

"Yes."

She'd come out of her passiveness, whatever had caused it. They went into the station and had their breakfast. It was good fried beef, with potatoes, biscuits and coffee, and he was relieved to see that Cornelia ate with appetite.

They reached the Hat Creek ranch in the heat of that day. They were close then to the ford where Beau was to strike his blow. When the horses had been changed, Pay stepped up to the driver.

"How about me riding on top a while?" he asked.

The seat beside the whipman was a privileged one, but this jehu seemed to like company. A weather-beaten man of middle age, he nodded, saying nothing. Cornelia had watched and heard, and as she got back into the stage Pay wished she knew why he had to leave her company and get up there on top. Doc Richie also was watching, and the look he flung Pay was plain poison.

PAY went up to the box, the driver also ascended, and again the stage sped on. Pay had knots in his spine every mile after that. They got deeper into the rough land that bordered the hills, country whose merits had been quickly appreciated by the outlaws who roamed this area.

At last they were bearing down on the point where Pay knew the decision must come. It was Beau's choice now, for his own was made. Breaks rose on their left, and soon appeared also on the right. The ford where he knew the action was scheduled was close ahead. Pay had a sudden sinking despair, a wonder why he should be forced to do this thing.

The stage rolled down the last grade before the creek crossing. Pay's eyes swept the willows in the foreground, trying to penetrate the deep shadows of its thicket. He saw nothing at first. But he knew it would happen after the horses had stopped to drink and then started on. The stage would be slowed, coming out of the water onto the bank. Then would come the command so often heard in these parts, "Hold up and reach high!"

As the Concord ground up from the ford, the muzzles of the horses dripping water, Pay was sure he saw something in the depths of the underbrush, off to his left. It was a mounted man, only partly seen, and it had to be Beau. He hoped that Beau could see and recognize him. That was the test. Beau would know who he had to fight if he made good his bargain with Richie. He'd have to find it in his heart to do so.

It seemed to Pay that a hundred grasshoppers had gotten into his throat and stomach. His hand had lowered to the grips of his sixgun, but the unworried driver didn't see that. Twice afterward Pay was certain that a mounted man waited in the thicket. The jehu didn't see that, either. The stage was soon rolling again at top speed. It had not been stopped.

There was only passing relief in that for Pay. Beau hadn't been able to do it, and now it was too late for him to act, for he was out of touch with Richie. Nonetheless, Richie still had to be dealt with, and he had been rendered twice as dangerous by this frustration.

When the stage stopped presently at Old Woman Creek, Pay dropped down from the box, meaning to get back inside where Richie would have him to handle, as well as Scott and Cornelia. Doc Richie piled out too, his eyes smoking with fury. Grasping Pay's arm openly, Richie drew him aside.

Then, in a rasping whisper, he said, "So you broke it up. Well, now you can pay for it. There won't be another chance like this in my life and I don't aim to lose it. If I have to pull the stick-up alone, I will."

"It'll be a big bite to chew," Pay warned.

"You're still going to help me, and so's that gutless Beau. You're dropping off here. Tell the driver you changed your mind about going to Deadwood. You can hire a horse

from the stage man here. They rent 'em all the time."

"Then?"

"You go back and pick up Beau. You'll pull ahead and bring it off before we hit May's Station."

"I don't yet see the inducement," Pay murmured.

"She's in that stage. I can tell from the sheep eyes you make you're crazy about her. Make me pull this alone, Pay, and she's the first one I'm going to get. Hear me?"

Richie knew the cogency of his threat. The only way Pay could keep him from carrying it out would be to outdraw him or pull on him by surprise and kill him. He'd have risked his own life on that, but when it came to Cornelia's he couldn't. Richie's eyes glittered as he waited.

"I hear you," Pay said hoarsely, "and I reckon you take the trick."

He told the driver of his change of plans, again not daring to explain a thing to Cornelia. He watched the stage carry her on, puzzled and probably turned against him once more. The station tender proved of a mind to let him take a horse. Pay mounted and headed out along the backtrail. He had ridden only a short distance when he saw a horseman coming. He knew it was Beau.

As they came together, Beau said bitterly, "So you loused it up. You knew good and well I couldn't start anything like that against you. Damn it, Pay, why'd you do it?"

"You're still wondering?"

Beau looked away, strain on his face, resentment, yet some of the old feeling and loyalty. "Maybe not," he muttered. "I was kind of having trouble with myself, even before I saw you."

"Wondering if Richie'd keep it as nice and bloodless as he promised?"

"That's about it."

"Right now," Pay said harshly, "he's waiting for you and me to pull down that stage the first place we see to do it. The girl I rode to Laramie with is the first one he says he'll drill if we don't."

"A girl?" Beau was staring hard at Pay. "So we're going to stop the stage."

"I reckon we are."

THEY started their horses and then were riding hard, leaving the trail and cutting a half circle to the west until they were ahead of the Concord. Presently, from a rise, Pay could see the vehicle below in the hazy distance, still rambling on for the end of the trail. They pressed ahead, the hoofs of their mounts drumming hard.

At the end of a half hour they cut in to the road. Beau had no thought now of masks and low-pulled hat brims. They simply sat there in the trail, facing the oncoming stage, open-mannered and with their hands empty. The driver showed more curiosity than alarm when he hauled down.

"What's the trouble, boys?" he called.

It hadn't occurred to him that he could be hauling anything valuable on this northbound trip, for the flow of wealth was all the other way. When the stage was stopped so openly, it was more apt to be by somebody out of matches, or wanting to send word somewhere.

But Pay and Beau were riding down past the horses, one on either side, Pay calling up to the box, "It's all right."

The door of the coach burst open ahead of him. Doc Richie piled out with a grin on his mouth. The expression was wiped off by bewilderment when he saw no gun in Pay's hand.

"Easy, Doc," Pay told him. "You're the only one around here who's going to get stuck up today. Lift 'em high."

But Richie had recovered his wits, and he saw his big chance gone. The black rage leaped back to his face as his hand made a streaking run for his gun.

Pay had waited until then so this business would have no resemblance to a hold-up. He accepted the challenge and went for his own sixgun. He got it, and the gun blazed fire, even as Richie shot.

But Pay was less disturbed by emotion, and his slug was the one that went in. The crash of the shots rang out over the plain. Doc Richie fell back against the coach, then slid down in a heap on the ground.

Urgently, Pay called, "It's all right, Scott! We're not trying to pull a stick-up, we only stopped one!"

The two passengers came out, Cornelia white and shaken, Scott furious but puzzled enough to hesitate.

"If you have any money on you, you nearly lost it," Pay told the rancher. "Richie, there, sure hankered to get his hands on it. We got suspicious last night in Three Mile, when he got drunk and was talking wild. I rode along on the stage hoping to discourage him, but he wouldn't discourage. This was the only way left to handle him."

Beau had come around the stage. He was shaken and started to say something, maybe to admit his part in it. Pay's eyes warned him to keep quiet.

"I don't reckon I'm surprised," Scott said. "It was Richie's notion to ride gun guard for me on this trip. I ought to have smelled a rat right there. But you might have trouble getting the law to believe your story, Pay. You stopped the stage, and the first thing I knew Richie'd been shot down."

"I saw it," the driver said. "Neither of these ducks had a gun in his fist, and it was Richie who drew first.

"Well," Scott said, "if you boys want your jobs back, you've got 'em. It'll be the first time I ever hired back a man who quit me."

"That wasn't the idea," Pay said, and then the stage went on.

Beau hadn't spoken even yet, and they sat there for a while afterward. Finally Pay said, "I guess our trail stays split a while, Beau. If you stay off the bottle, I figure you can keep out of jail. And if you're loose a year from now, look me up. I'll be somewhere around Deadwood."

Beau was a changed man right now, but in the months ahead that could wear away. He understood the requirement Pay had laid upon him before they could team up again.

He smiled, saying, "I reckon I'll see you in about a year, kid. But I think our trails'll still stay split. Good luck with your girl." He swung his horse and rode south.

Pay turned his own mount then and started after the stage. He was headed right, and he knew it.

Coming up in the next issue

Comanche Prairie

A flirting female like Rita spelled trouble to any man . . . and could set off the spark that would ignite a bloody range war

A Magazine-Length Novel

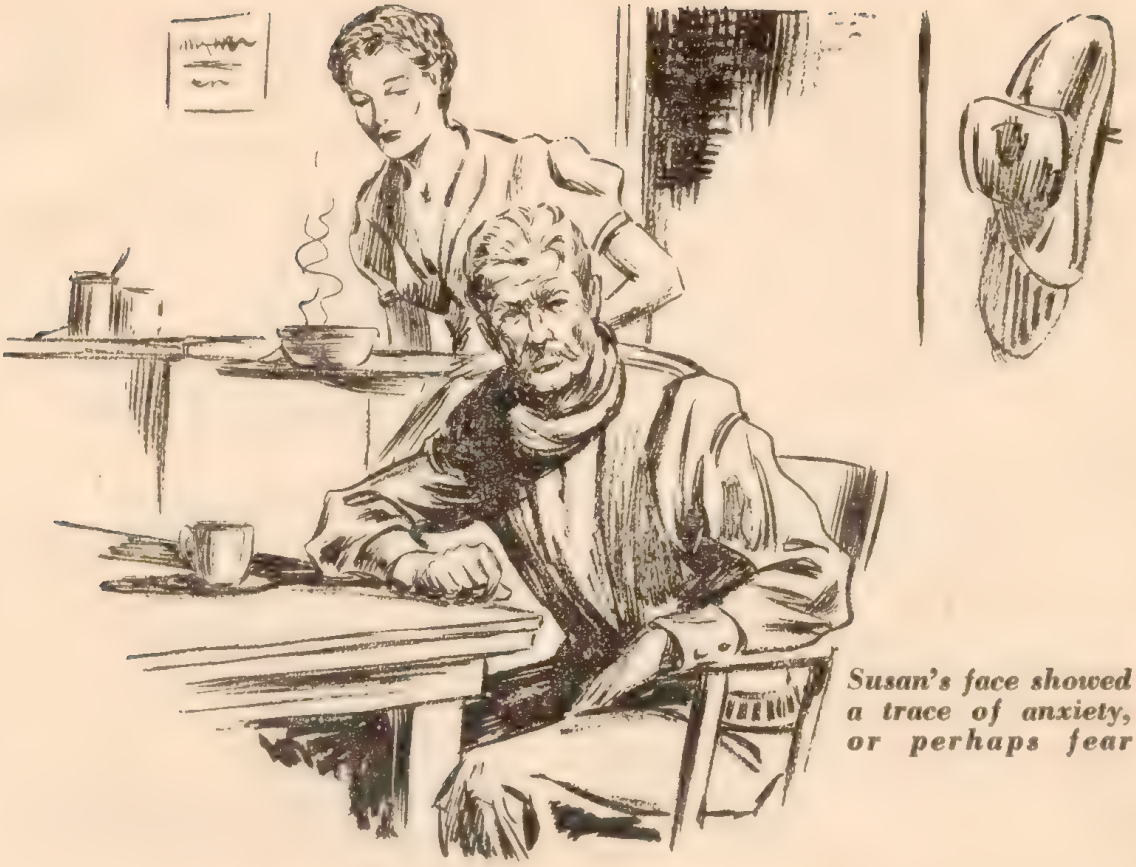
By GIFF CHESHIRE

The Call of the Maverick

Hap John's life had been carefree and easy . . . but getting mixed up in a murderer's plot has a way of making things complicated

An Exciting Novelette

By BEN SMITH



Susan's face showed a trace of anxiety, or perhaps fear

The Convict

By Jane L. Branch

FLETCHER WAS OUT to kill a man . . . and if it ruined a young girl's life, that was her own fault for getting in the way

FLETCHER rode into Pine City on a Monday morning and racked his horse out in front of the marshal's office. He went inside and recognized the stout man behind the desk. The man's name was Pat Hogan, and Fletcher had not seen him in over three years.

They shook hands, Hogan beaming, Fletcher smiling faintly. He was a big, granite-faced man of forty-five. Like Hogan, he had worn the badge in many cow towns of the Southwest, but for the past ten years he had worked as a special operative for a stage and express company. It was on a previous man-hunt to New Mexico that he had met Hogan.

"Last I heard, you were working out of Denver," Hogan said. "What brought you this far south?"

Fletcher sat down, scowling. He'd taken a leave of absence and was on a personal job, he said. "Did you hear what happened to my son Bill?"

"The last time we saw each other you said he'd gone to work as an operative for the stage outfit."

"That's right. And two years ago he was killed while investigating a stage holdup."

Fletcher's voice was quiet, too quiet. Hogan looked into the big man's stony eyes and had to look away. "Joe, I'm sorry to hear that."

"The fellow's name was Jake Meager. He operated with a gang around Durango. That was the gang Bill was after. Meager found out about it and shot him without warning." Fletcher paused. "Several persons got to Bill before he died. He told them he'd recognized Meager. That was the last anyone saw or heard of the outlaw."

"You think he might be around here?"

"There's a chance he may show up."

Hogan frowned. He shook his head doubtfully. "This is a peaceful town, Joe, not the kind of place that draws outlaws. It's been a long time since we've had any trouble around here."

"You ever hear of a man named Ed Bent?"

Fletcher was watching closely, and he saw Hogan's eyes sharpen momentarily. "I've heard the name, but I've never met the man," the marshal said slowly.

"You've met Susan Harris."

Hogan gazed at the top of his desk. When he looked up he said, "You haven't been idle, Joe."

Fletcher ignored that. "I helped break up the gang Meaker rode with, and two of that bunch talked to save their skins. So I learned plenty about Meager. He and Bent grew up in the same town. They drifted together. Then they were caught selling stolen beef to the mines. That is, Bent was caught; Meager got away. This happened about four years ago, in Arizona. I checked all the details and I know.

"Bent had been seeing a girl, the daughter of a storekeeper. Her father died two years ago, and she moved here and opened a restaurant. Meanwhile, Bent has been in the Yuma pen, and she's been writing to him. He got out a while back, and should be here tomorrow or the next day."

"Susan is a fine girl. Everyone in town thinks a lot of her." Hogan hesitated. "But I will admit I didn't know Ed Bent was in jail all these years. Susan has mentioned him, though."

"What did she say?"

"That Bent was in Texas, working and saving his money so he could come here and marry her."

"Has she said that he's due to arrive?"

Hogan nodded reluctantly. "You know what it means?"

"Sure," Fletcher said. "He wants to hide his past, and she's helping him. But that doesn't mean anything to me. I want Meager, and there's a slim chance that he knows Bent got out and will come here."

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it," Fletcher said. "If a man wants to go straight I believe in giving him a chance."

"If he behaves, yes. But then, as I told you, I'm not interested in Ed Bent."

"What makes you think Meager will come here?" Hogan asked impatiently. "Why should he bother with Bent?"

Fletcher looked at him. "Pat," he said, "an old law dog like you should know better than to ask that. Men of Meager's breed always look up their own kind because they feel they can trust each other."

"So you think Bent might be the bait that will lure Meager here, is that it?"

"Yes."

"And what will you do if Meager comes here?"

"I'll kill him."

Hogan studied the hard face in silence. Finally he shook his head. "No, you won't. You've worn a badge too long to kill a man without giving him a chance. Now you have no authority, so what you'll do if you find him is notify me, and I'll make the arrest."

"I mean to kill him, Pat."

"Then, unless you shoot him in self-defense, I'll have to arrest you for murder."

"I expect so," Fletcher said.

Hogan sighed. "Well, anyhow, he might not show up for weeks, or again, never."

"I can wait," Fletcher said.

HE STABLED his horse and strode back along the wooden sidewalk to the hotel. Pine City drowsed in the mild coolness of a spring day. Cotton clouds hovered above

the wooded slopes to the north, while southward grassy reaches faded in a yellowish haze, above which rose the peaks of distant mountains.

Several men nodded friendly greetings as Fletcher walked on, and a woman with a shopping basket smiled shyly. This was an off-the-trail settlement and a good place for a man to hide his past, Fletcher reflected sourly. It was a town where everyone knew everyone else, and where strangers were made to feel at home. It was exactly the kind of town where Meager would consider himself safe.

Fletcher paid a week in advance for a room facing the street, and went upstairs to wash and change his shirt. The sun hit the windows, and the room was warm and quiet. Sounds filtered in from the street. A little loneliness crept under his shell, but he was no longer sensitive to it. For a long time, after Mary had died, he'd had to drive himself to kill his loneliness. Bill had been a help, though. But now Bill, too, was gone.

That thought brought him back to Ed Bent. Fletcher had spent five days in Yuma this past month. He had talked to the warden and with several guards, and had learned what he needed to know. Ed Bent was coming to Pine City.

It was possible, of course, that Meager would meet Bent on the way. But that was a chance Fletcher had to take. He had at first thought of making the journey with Bent and watching his every move, but in the end he had decided against it because the ex-convict was bound to become suspicious. And then if Bent and Meager did meet, Bent would warn the outlaw.

Fletcher went downstairs and strode along the street until he found Susan Harris's restaurant. It was a narrow building next to the bank; on its other side was a general store. Fletcher entered out of curiosity more than anything else. As far as he was concerned, the girl was out of it, and he wanted nothing from her. Nine times out of ten, women who stuck with men like Bent weren't much good themselves. Still, it was odd to find one running a restaurant. Mostly they worked in dance halls, or worse.

Fletcher stepped inside and was mildly surprised. The place was smaller than he had thought, but it was spotless. The linoleum that covered the counter had a bright yellow pattern, and the walls were painted a fresh green. There were four tables with green and white checkered cloths against the opposite wall, and the curtains at the single window were of the same material.

The door at the rear stood open, and Fletcher had a glimpse of shiny pots and pans hanging from the wall, before Susan Harris came in with a stack of dishes.

"I'll be right with you," she said, smiling.

"No hurry."

He watched her put the dishes away under the counter. She was young, no more than twenty, and wore a white apron over her calico dress. Her brown hair was braided, and when she straightened he saw her firm, cheerful mouth and her clear brown eyes.

He scowled and said gruffly, "Coffee and a hunk of that apple pie."

"I have a nice beef stew," she began hesitantly.

"I'll try it."

He put his long legs over the bench, placed his hat next to him, and ran fingers through hair that showed traces of gray. He was thinking that this one was certainly different, young and fresh. But then so was Ed Bent young—twenty-three. They had pointed out the convict one day, when he was coming back from the rock pile.

He was in a double line of shuffling, sweating men in prison-striped suits. Fletcher remembered that Ed Bent had been taller than most of them and that he had walked erect, a thin smile on his hard-boned, sun-punished face.

Ed Bent and a girl like this one. Fletcher shook his head gloomily. It didn't make sense, if you looked at it from her side of the fence. Why had she waited, when the West was full of good men, men of the kind Bill had been? Bill'd had a girl, and they were to have married. The thought of that deepened the scowl on Fletcher's face.

Well, to hell with Bent and what could happen to him because of this business with Meager. Bent was more than likely figuring to hit the outlaw trail again, anyhow. And so he would end up back in the pen. The girl should have considered this possibility long

ago. Now, if she were hurt a second time, it would be her own fault.

She came in with a deep bowl of savory stew. Fletcher grunted and fell to hungrily, then soaked up the last of the gravy with a thick slice of homemade bread. He had a wedge of pie and two cups of coffee, sensing all this time that Susan was watching him.

"This is your first time in here, isn't it?" she asked finally.

"That's right."

"Are you going to settle around here?"

"No."

Her smile faded a little, and her eyes clouded over. Now her face showed a trace of anxiety, fear perhaps. He was a stranger in town, and Ed Bent was due to arrive any day. Now she was beginning to think along lines she should have considered long ago.

Before long—probably before supper time—she would hear that the stranger's first stop had been at the marshal's office. Then she would really begin to worry and wonder about said stranger. Was he a law officer? Was he here because of Ed? Or, worse yet, was he an outlaw Ed had known in the past?

It was too bad, but there was nothing Joe Fletcher could do about it. If he could trust Ed Bent, it would be different. But he couldn't. There was no telling how the man felt, how deep his hatred of the law ran. It might run deep enough to kill.

FLETCHER lit a cigar and got up. "Good stew. Best I've had in a long time."

"Thank you. I have some special T-bone steaks for supper."

He grunted. Under any other circumstances that would be called drumming up business. But not in his case. She wanted to know if he were staying, or just drifting through. She needed an answer. Fletcher didn't give her one. He paid and went out.

Later, he checked the stage schedule at the depot. There was a stage in at five, but Ed Bent wasn't aboard. Fletcher walked to the saloon and had a drink. He was thinking about having a second one when Pat Hogan entered and came over to him, smiling faintly.

"Nice evening," Hogan said.

Fletcher said, "Fine," and asked the bartender for an extra glass.

But Hogan declined the offer of a drink. "Never touch the stuff while I'm on duty." He smiled at Fletcher, his leathery skin crinkling at the corners of his eyes. "You see her?"

"Yeah," Fletcher said. "As if you didn't know." He poured a second drink, said casually, "What kind of work does Bent expect to get around here, do you know."

Hogan nodded. "Charlie Kemp's warehouse man, at the feed store, quit last week. Susan heard about it and asked Kemp if Ed Bent could have the job, so Kemp is holding it open for him."

"Fine. Then I'll have no trouble keeping an eye on him."

"Don't ride him, Joe."

"I don't want him to know I'm around."

"You have no right to use him." Hogan was beginning to sound a little angry. "I want that boy to have his chance in this town."

"Take it easy," Fletcher told him.

"Sure. But you have no right to get him mixed up in this business. You have no more right to use that boy than Meager did to kill your Bill."

"Be careful, Pat," Fletcher said softly.

"Because if you do you might scare him off," Hogan went on, his face flushed. "You have law written all over you, and he'll spot you sure. So don't fluster him. I'd rather see the boy straighten out and make Susan a good husband, than see you get Meager."

"You're worrying too much."

"No. If Meager comes here and sees Bent on the sly, Bent will tell him to go, and maybe he'll leave. But if you show and start trouble, the boy might get involved, and then I'd have to go after him. As it stands, we're the only ones that know about him, so let's keep it that way."

"I want Meager, and I mean to get him," Fletcher said coldly.

"All right," Hogan said, "but remember that I'll be on the other side."

He turned and walked out. Fletcher followed a few minutes later, his face set.

When he entered the restaurant for his supper, he knew from the way Susan looked at him that she had heard about his earlier visit with Pat Hogan. She seemed taut and upset, and her eyes evaded his when he ordered his

meal. Fletcher knew fright when he saw it, and he felt a moment's need to explain the truth to her. But what was the use?

Next morning he was at the depot when the stage pulled in, but Ed Bent was not one of the passengers. He arrived on the afternoon stage. Fletcher knew he would, when he saw Susan waiting at the depot. She gave Fletcher one quick, frightened glance and then paid no further attention to him.

Fletcher leaned in the shade of the awning and watched the coach roll to a stop. Then the door opened and Ed Bent stepped down. He stood there a second and scanned faces, a wary, somehow hostile expression on his face, looking awkward in the cheap suit that was too tight for his wide shoulders.

"For heaven's sake, George, put it out or he'll never leave."

Then his eyes found Susan, and his face lighted up. He hurried to her, and she met him with a muffled sob of delight. For a moment they stood holding each other. Then, her face radiant, they walked away arm in arm.

After that, whenever he strolled around the town, Fletcher would make it a point to glance the length of Kemp's warehouse until he saw Ed Bent working. He never went back there. Two or three times he passed the time of day with Kemp, who had an office of sorts inside the front door. Once, after Bent had come in to ask a question, Kemp remarked that he'd certainly hired himself a good man.

"Best warehouse man I ever had. Handles those sacks of grain like they were loaded with feathers. Strong as a bull, that boy."

Fletcher had to smile, wondering what Kemp would say if he knew Bent had acquired his muscles breaking rocks. But he never said anything. And when he came across Bent in the restaurant, he ignored the boy.

Susan took notice of this. Little by little, she became again the cheerful girl Fletcher had seen on first entering her place. And after a few days the air of wariness, the sense of strain, eased in Ed Bent. Sitting on the hotel veranda of an evening, Fletcher would watch them stroll by, and hear their voices and their soft laughter. He would watch them until they turned up Elm Street, toward the boarding house where they both had rooms.

TWO weeks passed like that, and then one day Pat Hogan strolled up as Fletcher was soaking in the sun. "You hear the news?" he asked. "The kids are getting married the first Sunday of next month."

"That's nice."

"Joe," Hogan said, "you're wasting your time. Meager will never come here. For all you know, he's dead and planted by now."

"Possible. But I have another week due me, and I'll stick it out."

"Well, it's your business," Hogan said, and walked back to his office.

Fletcher frowned and leaned back in his chair, his brooding eyes on the sunny street. He was remembering his own marriage. And then he recalled the day Bill and his girl had come to him to announce with happy faces that they planned to be married. Fletcher shook himself, ugly anger like a thorn in his flesh. It wasn't good to think of Bill as being dead, the girl as being miserable, while a young outlaw . . .

He rose, swearing softly, and went up to his room.

On Thursday morning two riders came in from the east. One dismounted in front of the saloon and went inside. Fletcher strolled over from the hotel and leaned in the shade, smoking a cigar. Finally the one man came outside, and Fletcher took a good look at both of them. They were of medium size, whiskered and unkempt, and they had a hungry look to them. Their horses were trail worn.

"Well?" the one in the saddle said, and the second man grinned and nodded. He climbed aboard his horse, and they rode on down the street.

Fletcher somehow wasn't surprised when they turned past the feed store. He hurried down the nearest alley and came up behind Kemp's warehouse, where Bent had been at work unloading a wagon of sacked wheat. Now he was sitting on the load, his face tight-set, looking down at the two riders.

Fletcher could not hear what was being said. But once the two strangers laughed, and a little later Bent's voice rose angrily, saying, "I don't care! You tell him what I told you!"

The men grinned at each other. Then one of them spoke again, and Bent half rose and took a gold coin from his pocket, which he tossed to the nearest rider. The fellow gave him a mocking salute, and then both turned their horses back to the street.

Ed Bent stared after them. Then, with sudden fury, he picked up a sack of wheat and threw it on the platform so hard that the sack split and spilled golden grains a dozen feet along the rough boards.

Fletcher returned to the street in time to see one of the riders swing down and enter the general store. He was wondering if these two were with Meager. Had Meager, afraid to show himself in town, sent these two to talk to Bent? Fletcher thought of having his horse saddled and following them, but he decided it would not do to arouse their suspicions. Since they'd asked Bent for money, they must be broke. Fletcher had the feeling they would be back.

He watched one of the men come out of the store and speak to the man on horseback. They both turned and looked at the restaurant next door. Then the fellow stowed his purchases in his saddlebags, and the two men trotted out of town.

Frowning, Fletcher returned to his chair on the hotel veranda. The sun lowered and shadows lengthened. Fletcher waited until he saw Bent head toward the restaurant, before he rose and followed.

Ed Bent was sitting at the end of the counter, talking to Susan, when Fletcher entered. Strain showed in his smile, in the sound of his voice, but she didn't appear to notice. So he hadn't told her, Fletcher thought. He was playing a lone hand and hoping to get away with it.

Fletcher had his supper, and Bent was still there when he paid and walked out, smoking a cigar. Outside, it was getting dark. He strolled along, waiting. Finally Ed Bent stepped through the door and scanned the street quickly, before trudging toward the corner. As he made the turn, Fletcher appeared from the shadows.

He said mildly, "Evening, Bent."

Bent stopped as though a fist had caught him in the chest. Then he wheeled about and stared at Fletcher's tall shape. In a taut voice he said, "What do you want?"

"Information about the two men you talked to this afternoon," Fletcher said.

"What men? What're you talking about?"

"Stop it, Bent."

Bent took a ragged breath. "I've seen you hanging around. What do you want from me?"

"I want Meager," Fletcher said.

Bent turned his head and gazed the length of the darkening street, like a man seeking a place to hide. "I don't know any Meager," he said, and started to walk on.

Fletcher took hold of his arm. "You fool!" he said. "Don't you know what you're up against? Do you think for one minute Meager will leave you alone now that he's found you? Having grown up with him, you should know better than that."

Bent groaned. Then he jerked his arm free. His face had a pale, ravaged look in the furtive light. "Damn it, leave me alone! That's all I want—just leave me alone."

But he stood where he was, his body quivering, his fists clenched. Fletcher said gently, "I'm after Meager, son. I mean to get him one way or another. And you can help me and help yourself by telling me what you know."

A helpless look crossed Bent's face, and it seemed he was ready to speak when his mouth stiffened. Fletcher watched, feeling helpless himself. Bent would be remembering his years in jail. And, like any man who had spent time behind bars, he would fear and distrust any law officer. Bent shook his head stubbornly.

"You got hold of the wrong man, mister."

"No," Fletcher said. "You know better than that."

The shine of sweat was on Bent's forehead. "Look," he began desperately. And then, "All right. But I don't know where he is. I told those fellows that I didn't want anything to do with him." He turned on Fletcher. "Now are you satisfied? Now will you leave me alone?" Without waiting for an answer, he strode blindly along the side street.

FLETCHER went back to his room. He didn't light the lamp, but sat in the dusk and watched the lamplit restaurant window. Around nine o'clock, Susan pulled the shade down, and after this Fletcher went donwstairs and walked slowly toward the end of the street.

The picture was pretty clear to him, and now it was a matter of waiting. It could happen tonight, or it might not happen for several days. But in the end, Meager would show. Fletcher had learned enough about the man to know that it was in him to do so. Maeger was like a bulldog; he held on and bettered his hold at every chance. Now he would not release his grip on young Bent.

Fletcher turned back. Light still glowed behind the restaurant shade, and he wondered at this. He came around the alley and stood a while in the darkness, seeing and hearing nothing. Then, very faintly, the sound of thumping reached him. Then that sound faded as footsteps tramped his way, and he saw the shadowy figures of two men approach.

Fletcher slipped his gun from its holster. He had recognized Ed Bent's tall figure; the second man was shorter by a foot and walked slightly behind Bent.

It wasn't till they were abreast of him that Fletcher saw the gun in the smaller man's hand. And then, suddenly, this man became aware of him and turned with a startled oath. Fletcher stepped in and struck him across the temple with the barrel of his gun. The man sagged and sprawled to the ground.

Bent had turned, and Fletcher stepped close to him. "Now talk," he said in a hard voice.

Bent took a breath. "He told me they have Susan inside. They came through the back door right after she closed up."

"Meager?"

Bent nodded. "They learned about Susan, and that her place was next to the bank. The wall between is nothing but wood and plaster, so—"

Bent broke off, and now both men listened to the faint sound of hammering. Susan is inside, Fletcher thought, and Meager had sent for Bent, wanting him there. All right, Meager, Fletcher thought.

"Go ahead of me and knock," he said. "And when they open the door, take care of Susan."

"I can't. Meager will kill her."

"We've got to go in there. It's our only chance. If you and this fellow don't show up, the way they expect, they'll get suspicious."

"They'll kill her, I tell you!"

"Walk over there and rap on that door."

Fletcher reached down and pulled the unconscious man against the wall. Then he found the gun, pushed it under his belt. Bent was at the door, and now he rapped. The door opened slowly and a shaft of light struck Bent across the face.

Meager's husky voice said, "Well, if it isn't Ed. Come on in, boy."

As Bent stepped across the sill, Fletcher shouldered into him and sent him staggering into the kitchen. Then he lunged inside himself, catching a glimpse of the man on his knees against the wall. The man held a crowbar in his hand, and there was a gaping hole in the wall. As Fletcher plunged into the room, he dropped the crowbar and fumbled for his gun.

Fletcher fired, dropping him, then twisted as a second shot roared in the room. He saw Meager crouched beside the still-open door, gun in hand. He threw himself flat and shot a second time, just as Meager fired again.

The gun fell from Meager's grasp. He dropped to both knees, grinning at Fletcher. Then he looked down at the blood stain spreading across the bulge of his thigh.

"Pick up your gun," Fletcher said.

Meager blinked and made no move to pick it up.

Fletcher said, "You've never met me, but I know all there is to know about you. Two years ago you shot my son without warning. Now I mean to kill you. Pick up that gun!"

Meager stared at him with a weak smile. "I'm not gonna pick up the gun," he said.

Fletcher raised his own weapon, thinking of Bill dead. For two years he had known that one day he would find Meager and kill him. But now he hesitated, wanting the cold rage that had been his for so long a time. But it did not come. Something older and steadier was there in its place, and he could not fight it. He lowered the gun and looked, with dull eyes, at the man against the wall.

"Watch it, Joe!"

He spun back as a shot exploded, saw Meager fall forward on his face, saw the gun slip from his fingers. Through the door came Hogan, a smoking Colt in his hand.

He looked at Fletcher and said, smiling faintly, "I told you you wouldn't kill him, Joe. You've worn the badge too long. But," he added, "you should have known better than to turn your back on him."

"I was busy hating myself for not killing him," Fletcher said.

Bent and Susan had come from the front, behind the counter. Bent looked from Hogan to Fletcher and said shakily, "You believe me, don't you?"

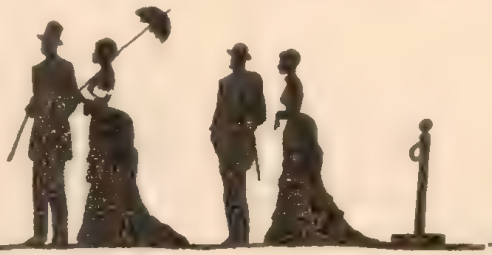
Fletcher said, "Pat, I figured something was going on in here. But I'd never have gotten inside if it hadn't been for Bent. He came to walk Susan home, and they opened the door when he knocked. So all I had to do was follow them inside."

"I figured as much," Hogan said, smiling.

Fletcher felt fine, and he had to grin at the obvious relief that surged across the faces of Bent and Susan. "I apologize now for any bad moments I might have given you," he said, and turned to Hogan. "Well, that closes a case. I'll see you in the morning before I leave, Pat."

"Mr. Fletcher," Susan said hesitantly, "could you stay for our wedding? We'd be proud to have you."

He looked at them as he might have looked at his own son and daughter-in-law, and suddenly something filled in him, and it was like having a famliy, a place to call home again.



MARITAL MARVEL

By PHIL SQUIRES

I'm a cowpuncher prize
When it comes to amour!
I evoke female sighs
With my manly allure!

My wife, understand,
Also thinks I am grand—
The acme of romantic wishes—
But she's 'specially glad
That she married a lad
Who also knows how to wash dishes!

Tobacco on the Frontier

a true story by Ross Phares

THERE was an old pioneer saying that a Texan out of tobacco was an individual not to be fooled with. You can get an argument to this day on whether or not tobacco is a luxury or a necessity.

The extensive use of tobacco by cowboys is illustrated in a statement by Bishop and Giles in "Lots of Land": One manager of the XIT Ranch "ordered a carload of cigarette papers as a winter's supply for his line riders."

Cattleman Charles Goodnight spoke of the value of tobacco for men forced to go long periods without food. "I noticed that tobacco chewers seemed to feel the hunger less than those who did not use it; it appears that tobacco possesses a tendency to stay the appetite."

Trail bosses took every precaution against running out of tobacco on the long cattle drives, where armed men might become irritable when out of tobacco.

Substitutes were often resorted to. One old-timer said of an emergency, "At the ranch there was a big mesquite stump in front of the mess house that the cook used to knock the grounds out of the coffee pot on, and they had accumulated around it for weeks. The boys scraped all of these up and smoked them when they ran out of tobacco."

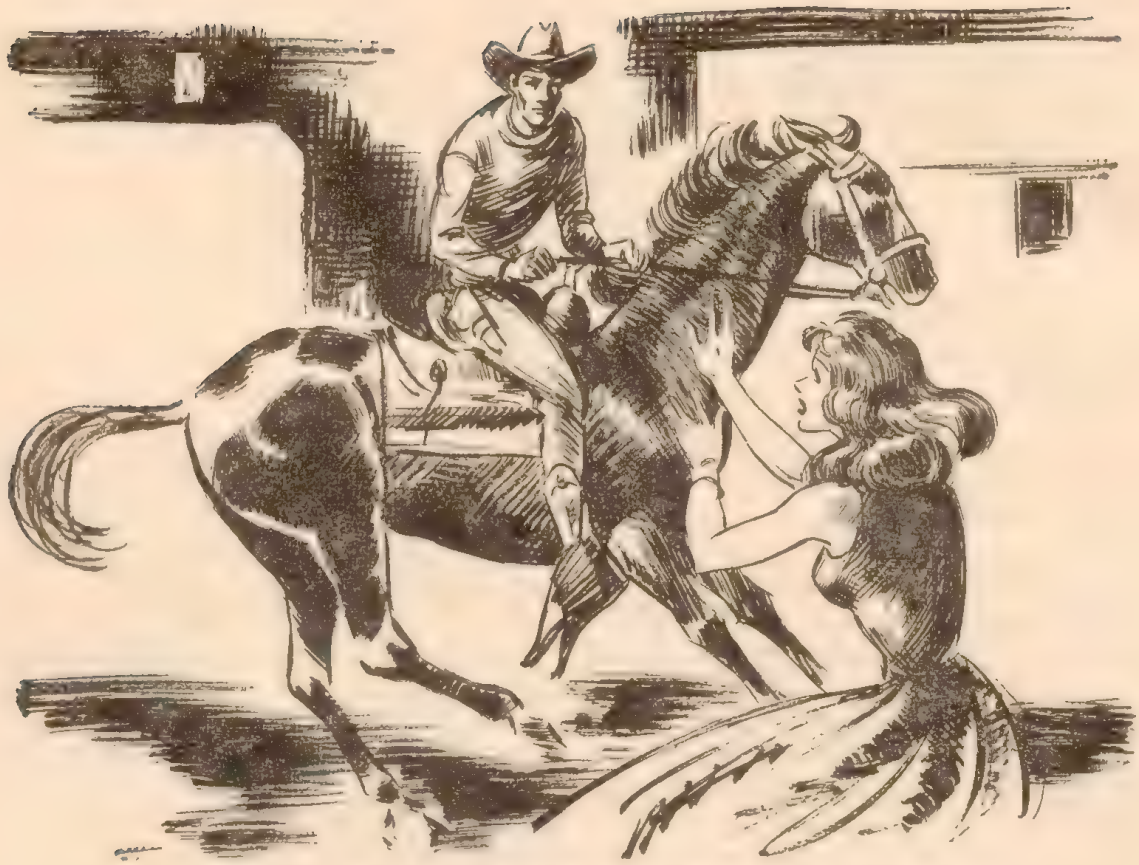
Rollins in "The Cowboy" stated that often tobacco odor aided scouts in trailing men. "An excessive user of tobacco might have all his belongings so permeated with the weed's smell that his handkerchief or piece of cloth lying in the way would speak more definitely to the nose of the scout than to the latter's eyes."

Uses of tobacco on the frontier were many. It served as an insecticide in the home, the garden, and the barn. It was extensively used as medicine for toothache, jaundice, and dyspepsia. Tobacco poultices were applied to wounds to stop bleeding. Smoke was blown into ears to relieve earache. It was said that tobacco was good for corpulent persons in that it would make them "spit their fat away." Some parents testified that unhealthy children began to grow when they started using tobacco. The theory was that the poison of the tobacco killed poisons existing in their systems.

There has always been a lot of preaching against tobacco, without any noticeable results.

Evangelist Sam Jones, in order to help the women in a small Texas town save a new church carpet from tobacco juice, said at the beginning of his sermon, "I did not come here to deliver an anti-tobacco lecture, and if I had I wouldn't expect to get anywhere with a lot of old billy goats like you. I am not asking you to quit chewing tobacco.

"If you have a fresh chew in your mouth when you get here and don't want to lose the tobacco, just take it out of your mouth, put it on a chip, and lay it outside by the doorstep. You can get it when you get out of church. But I'll tell you, Bud, you'd better mark your chip; some other man might get it."



"They'll kill you too if you try to stop them," Cassie said

LAW for the GREENHORN

By Leola Lehman

SLOWLY, half reluctant, Jeb Stone walked down the worn gray boardwalk toward the little house where Cassie Stephens lived. The badge on his shirt front flashed in the bright sunlight. That badge was going to be a surprise to Cassie, Jeb thought, and not a pleasant one either. Last night he'd had a talk with her about accepting the sheriff's badge—even before it was offered to him—and she was dead set against it. For all she cared, Cottonwood could get along without a sheriff.

"Isn't it enough that badge cost me my brother?" she'd said. "Must it take you away from me too?"

Her brown eyes were big and dark with tears she wouldn't let fall, and Jeb had taken her in his arms and tried to drive away her fear. He'd tried to make her see how he felt about the law in this raw country in which they lived.

IT WAS GOING to be a safe country to live in some day, Jeb vowed, even if he had to give up the girl he loved to make it so

"There have to be lawmen, Cassie." He'd pressed her head to his shoulder, felt the softness and fineness of her golden hair against his rough fingers. "More people are coming in all the time. Without the law we'd have a dog-eat-dog country where no decent man or woman could live in peace."

But Cassie couldn't—or wouldn't—see it his way. Jim Stephens, her brother and only close relative, had worn that badge and it had brought him to his death only four days ago. She'd never agree to let the man she married wear it. Talk got Jeb nowhere with her. She had put it up to him: give up the badge or give her up.

Now Jeb frowned, and the wrinkles across his forehead deepened. Jim had been Cassie's brother, but he had been Jeb's friend. Jeb had been proud to serve as deputy under such a man as Jim Stephens, and he couldn't drop the fight that had cost Jim his life.

For two years the Big Bend country had been harassed by a band of cattle thieves as elusive as shadows. Of late they had become more bold, and Jim had stepped up his fight against them. Then, when it seemed that he'd gotten hold of something real to go on, he'd been picked off like a clay pigeon on the way out to the Lazy S, the heaviest loser from the rustlers' raids.

Jeb's lips thinned and his hand dropped carelessly to the gun swung low on his thigh. No, he'd not drop this fight. Whoever had gotten Jim would pay!

In front of the small white house, Jeb stopped, then turned in. Cassie would see it his way, he thought. She couldn't want this country to become a savage no-man's land—not after the way men such as Jim had worked and planned and died to make it a fine and good place to live. He'd reason till he made her understand. With this hopeful promise to himself, he knocked on the door.

But Cassie hadn't changed overnight. At sight of the badge the tiny dimple at the corner of her mouth vanished and her whole face tightened up.

"So you accepted, after all," she said.

For a moment Jeb thought he was going to be left standing on the stoop, but Cassie finally motioned him to come inside. Then she just sat stiffly and waited for him to speak. He shifted awkwardly in the straight chair. Cassie was making this as hard for him as she could, but he had to make a try.

JEB touched the badge with a lean finger. "To turn this down would be the same as turning Jim down, Cassie," he said. "A man can't turn his back on a fight he helped start."

He saw Cassie's face turn pale, but she didn't say a word. He went on. "I wish you'd let yourself understand," he said slowly. "When folks like old Jameson at the Lazy S come in here to live, they have the right to expect some protection from the law."

He looked hopefully at the girl's face, then made himself go on. "Jameson's going to be ruined in another year if those rustlers aren't caught. Young Parker will never even get started."

The frozen look on Cassie's face didn't soften. Jeb shook his head. "It's no use, is it, Cassie?" he said. When she didn't answer he got heavily to his feet, and added, "I'll be going."

He couldn't just forget everything he believed in, not even for the girl he loved. He'd clean out those cattle thieves and then move on to a new place where he could forget this girl with her angel's smile and her will of iron. For a moment his arms ached with the need to hold her.

He knew he'd never care for another woman. Still, there was something strong and deep inside him which refused to allow him to turn his back on his duty as he saw it.

He stopped for a while in the office of the jail and talked with Charlie Black, his deputy. "Guess I'll ride out over Jim's trail again and see if I can find anything," he said.

Charlie nodded.

The lines in Jeb's face were deep as he saddled his chestnut mare and rode slowly out of Cottonwood into the surrounding rangeland. He brought his mind to the job ahead. Jim had been on his way to the Lazy S when he was ambushed and shot. The Lazy S was the ranch hardest hit by the rustler gang, so Jim must have learned something new and been investigating it that day. Jeb

might as well start where Jim had left off.

Old Jameson, who owned the Lazy S, had come to the Big Bend country from the East about three years before. He'd started as a poor manager, and he still was. His first mistake had been when he fired Clint Staley and put Rufe Zollern in as ramrod of his outfit.

Zollern was nothing more than a shifty-eyed gun fanner. Perhaps Jameson had felt his weakness in the West, and had thought that with a hired gun he had all the protection he needed. But it was cattle thieves who were driving his back to the wall, not gunmen. If he hadn't come in well-heeled in the first place, he'd have lost out long ago.

Young Parker, on the other hand, didn't have anything to fall back on. His was a cocklebur outfit, and already there had been suspicious looks turned in his direction. When a man came in to start from scratch, his neighbors naturally wondered how he planned to go about building up a herd. And Parker was a wild colt, a laughing, rawhiding kid who never seemed to look ahead from one day to the next. Jeb was coming up to his place now—the Sleepy 8, Parker called it.

Jeb rode on until he noticed a calf by the road. A Sleepy 8 brand had been botched on it. Even from where Jeb was he could see that it had been put on over a Lazy S brand with a running iron.

ONLY a greenhorn would do such a job —a greenhorn like young Parker! A sick feeling touched Jeb for a moment. He'd always liked that kid, for all his irresponsible ways. And now this. There was only one way to take a worked-over brand. Parker must be stealing Lazy S cattle, and might even be mixed up in the rustler gang.

Slowly, Jeb rode on, checking the brands on half-a-dozen other calves. They were all worked over. Anger roiled inside him. It might have been the discovery of these very calves that had brought death to Jim Stephens.

Jeb pulled the mare about sharply and headed for the Sleepy 8 ranch house. Now that he had something to go on, he'd get the rest of it out of that brash kid.

Half an hour or so later he came in sight of the weathered ranch buildings. Parker was outside, working at something under an old stump of a tree. His brick-red hair flamed over his freckled face, but his blue eyes were friendly as he stopped whistling and grinned at Jeb.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he called cheerfully.

Jeb nodded stiffly, and dismounted. "Saw some of your calves on the way over. Brand's rough."

Jeb stopped to give the kid a chance to explain, but Parker just stared at him.

"Your brand is laid on over the Lazy S." Fury made Jeb's voice rough.

Parker scratched his head, and then laughed in a strained way. "I don't have a branded calf on the place." he said.

Parker looked as though he had just realized the seriousness of what Jeb had said. Jeb stared at him and felt an uneasy misgiving. The kid looked innocent, and he sounded innocent. But Parker wouldn't be the first to look like a kid and turn out to be a sidewinder.

Jeb motioned toward the corral. "Saddle up," he ordered.

Still protesting that he didn't know what it was all about, Parker got his horse and started in to Cottonwood with Jeb. On the way, Jeb tried to get information about the rustlers and Jim's ambush from Parker, but he kept insisting that he didn't know a thing.

Jeb fought down the anger that kept rising up inside him. Whoever had shot Jim was mixed up in this cattle-stealing business, and they were going to pay. Parker would, too, unless he could give some explanation for those worked-over brands.

When they reached Cottonwood, Jeb saw men turn to look, and knew the buzz of talk that would follow them. Charlie had evidently told them Jeb was out looking for evidence, and now these men were busy putting two and two together. The whole countryside was stirred up about the cattle thieves, and Jeb knew he'd have to keep a sharp eye out, or Parker wouldn't last until Judge Williams came to hold court.

PARKER'S face was pale by the time they reached the frame jail. He still insisted that he didn't have a branded calf on his place, but something of the kind

(Turn to page 82)

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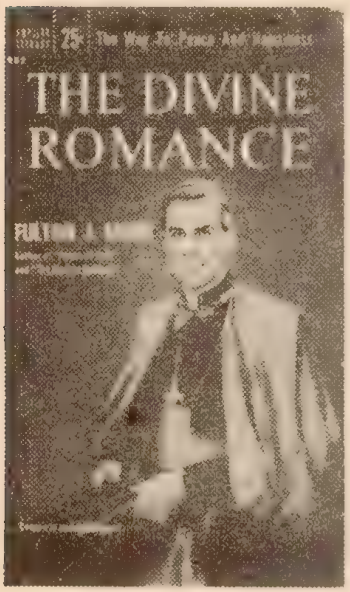

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was to be expected. No rustler ever admitted his guilt.

Then Jeb pulled up his thoughts. Where was all the big talk about justice and law that he'd dished out to Cassie? He was calling the kid guilty before Parker was even brought before the judge. Jeb slept restlessly that night. He tried to push his doubts of Parker's guilt out of his mind, but when he got up next morning they were still there.

When he stepped into the Cattlemen's Cafe for breakfast he felt a tenseness in the air. There was a queer excitement in the faces of the other men who ate near him, and Jeb's eyes narrowed suddenly. He'd seen that look more than once in the eyes of men working up to a lynching. This time, he knew, they were thinking about young Parker.

Quickly, he finished his cake and coffee, and then hurried down to the livery stable. He'd ride out and look around on the Sleepy 8, give it a thorough going over. If Parker were actually mixed up with the rustler gang, there might be some sign of it.

It took a while for a mob to work itself up to the pitch where it was ready to hang a man. Parker would be safe for a few more hours, with Charlie to take care of things.

Jeb saw the lace curtain move in Cassie's living room as he rode by, and for a moment he felt alone. He needed the warmth and strength of knowing the woman he loved was behind him today. Then his lean jaw tightened. He thought, if Parker is innocent he'll go free, not swing from the rope of a hang-crazy mob.

Jeb pushed the chestnut on. This was no time to loaf along. He had to do this job and get on back to the jail. The middle of the afternoon would see action in town, and Jeb had to be on hand.

ONCE on the Sleepy 8, Jeb roved about on the brushy, rolling rangeland. His eyes darted into every clump of scrub oak and searched every thicket. There wasn't a thing. The sun was high overhead and Jeb felt a restless, growing urge to head back to Cottonwood. Still, as he started on his return trail, he kept looking, and just before he left Sleepy 8 land he saw what he'd come for.

Breaking through a heavy clump of brush, he went tense and pulled the mare to a quick stop, excitement racing through him. There below him, in a tiny clearing, was a picket corral. A dozen or more bawling calves milled about in the small enclosure and, squatting beside a nearby campfire, were two men. One shoved an iron rod into the flames and the other rose, twirled a lariat, and started toward the corral. Jeb stared, completely surprised.

That was Rufe Zollern! He'd know that squat, heavy-shouldered figure anywhere. The other was a Lazy S rider Jeb had seen about the streets of Cottonwood many times.

Why were Lazy S cattle being branded on Parker's place? Suspicion narrowed Jeb's eyes. Could these be the real rustlers, with Parker just being used as the fall guy? That would explain a lot of things—the way riders and stolen cattle vanished without a trace, swallowed up on the wide Lazy S range when they were pressed; and the impression of innocence young Parker gave, in spite of the evidence against him.

As Jeb watched, the cowboy roped and snubbed down a struggling calf, and Zollern ran on a brand. Jeb's mouth went hard and a hot fury blazed over him. It was all he could do to sit there and watch, but he wanted evidence enough to convince Judge Williams and that lynch-crazy mob back in Cottonwood that these were the men who'd killed Jim and framed an innocent man. He had to see what brand was going on those calves.

As he watched, a rider broke through on the other side of the clearing and pulled up beside the campfire. He jumped from his saddle and ran to where the other men stood. For a moment he talked, his hands waving wildly. Jeb wished he could hear what was being said, especially when Zollern threw back his head and laughed.

Then all three men headed for their horses. Zollern turned and pointed to the picket corral, and one of the men ran back and jerked an opening in it big enough for the calves to get out. Moments later the three riders raced away hell-for-leather.

Quickly, Jeb pushed his horse to a trot as he hurried down to look the calves over. A sharp exclamation was torn from him. He'd been right. The Sleepy 8 brand was botched on so it couldn't be mistaken for a good one.

Perhaps this very stunt was what Jim had discovered that day he rode out to the Lazy S. Jeb's anger turned to cold fury. He slapped the reins down on the mare.

THEN a thought struck him. That message the rider had brought Zollern could be about what was happening to young Parker now. Jeb touched spurs to the chestnut, wanting to get back to Cottonwood before anything happened. As likely as not, Zollern was on his way to hurry things.

When Jeb rode into town at a fast trot and saw the deserted street, he knew he'd arrived none too soon. Around the corner where the old wooden jail stood, he heard a growling murmur which grew to a roar as Jeb approached. The lynch mob!

Jeb urged his tired horse on. Young Parker was innocent, and Jeb would never allow a mob to take the kid from jail to hang.

A flash of white off to one side caught his eye, and then Cassie was there in front of him. Jeb pulled to one side to miss her. "I can't stop, Cassie," he said.

Cassie's face went even whiter than before. Jeb frowned to see the frantic way her hands twisted and wrung together, fear in every line of her slim body. Then she spoke.

"Don't go, Jeb. They'll kill you too if you try to stop them. Don't die for a rustler! Don't leave me." Tears streamed down her pale face.

A muscle jumped along Jeb's jaw. "Parker is innocent, Cassie. He isn't going to hang."

Jeb pushed the picture of Cassie's frightened face out of his thoughts as he touched his spurs to his horse. A moment later he was forcing his way through the growling, muttering crowd of men. His deputy, Charlie, stood in front of the closed door of the jail with a pleading look on his blanched face.

Jeb leaped up beside his deputy and faced the wrought-up throng below him. His eyes roved from face to face. There, at the very front, stood Zollern.

Zollern met Jeb's eyes insolently, and his thick lips curled back from his yellow teeth in an ugly grin. "We want the rustler, Sheriff." A muttering roar came from the crowd.

Jeb looked at the evil face of the gun fanner, and saw death there for the innocent greenhorn, or anybody else who stood in his way. A coldness went through Jeb as he thought, this is the showdown.

"Men," he shouted, "you're after the wrong person. It's Zollern who used the running iron. I saw it done, not four hours ago!"

DEAD silence fell. Befuddled as these men were, they knew Jeb and they knew he'd speak the truth. Shocked, the men near the gun fanner backed away, until he stood alone, a tense, tigerish figure with his unblinking eyes fixed on Jeb, his fingers hooked inches above his gun.

Then, swift as a flicker of light, the gun fanner's hand dropped. Jeb's flashed down at the same time, and there were two heavy crashes of sound. Hot fire tore at Jeb's shoulder but he stood, his eyes never leaving Zollern's face. He saw the squat body jerk, saw the shaky hand try and try again to lift the gun. Then Zollern crumpled to the ground.

Jeb's eyes searched the crowd of men before him, and saw the hard-faced Lazy S riders pushing through the others toward their horses. "Get those men." His voice was no longer a shout, but it was heard.

When he saw the men close in on the rustlers, Jeb turned and walked into the tiny jail office, his hand held tightly against his reddening shirt sleeve.

Jeb had hardly dropped into a chair when the first of Zollern's riders was pushed through the doorway. Minutes later young Parker was freed by the very men who'd been hell-bent to hang him such a short time before. Jeb grinned wryly. The real rustlers would get a fair trial. Mob fever in Cottonwood had simmered down for now.

Then he turned away as pain lanced through his shoulder. The next thing he knew, soft hands were pressed against his face, and Cassie's tear-choked voice brought his head about.

"I heard you speaking to the men out there, Jeb. I'm proud my man wears a badge."

Then the salt of Cassie's tears were on Jeb's lips and a deep gladness was in his heart. He could have the woman he loved and do the work he felt he must do. Cottonwood would have law for the greenhorn.

Wilderness Echoes

a fact story by Ferris Weddle

DUSK was merging into swift darkness as the hunter headed for camp, abruptly uncertain about directions in the wilderness gloom. The unnatural silence was shattered with a suddenness that made a chill pass down his spine. A voice, primitive and urgent, resounded in the forest, was caught in the canyons, and echoed and re-echoed.

Another voice, even closer, answered, and the panicky hunter wondered what *is* it? It was like no other sound he had ever heard—a combination roar and whistle, with parts of it distinct like the call of a bugle, ending in mixed low notes that were like grunts.

A cougar? The hunter did not want to think that it was. There was a great deal of doubt, even among old-time outdoor men, about cougars screaming.

Once more the nightmarish sound echoed in the stillness, but it was farther away now. The hunter managed a weak grin at his tenderfoot reaction: It was probably just an owl, or some other bird. Wilderness voices had a tendency to be magnified after nightfall.

Nevertheless, the sight of his hunting companions hunkered around a cheerful campfire was more than welcome.

"By gum, Jake, we figured you might have gotten lost," an old timer greeted him. He added with a grin, "Looks like you ran into something, or heard something."

"I heard something," Jake admitted. "Most God-awful sound I ever heard."

"The bugle of a bull elk, no doubt," the oldster said. "We heard one, in the distance, a while ago. This is rutting season, and they usually kick up a fuss. Don't believe there's a more hair-raising sound in the wilderness."

Jake felt slightly foolish, but he was reassured when others in the party admitted that they had reacted in a similar fashion to the elk's mating challenge. It's an experience that is not easily forgotten.

It is partially the surprise of an elk's bugle that makes a person shaky, for one seldom thinks that big game animals have a variety of voices. The elk, or wapiti as it is correctly known, has a wider variety of sounds than most game animals.

In addition to the bugling during rutting season, the bulls also give voice to a number of other sounds, largely grunts and cough-like barks. Often, during mating season, the verbal battles between bulls lead to gory, antler-to-antler struggles. It isn't unusual for one of the combatants, or both, to be killed if the antlers become locked.

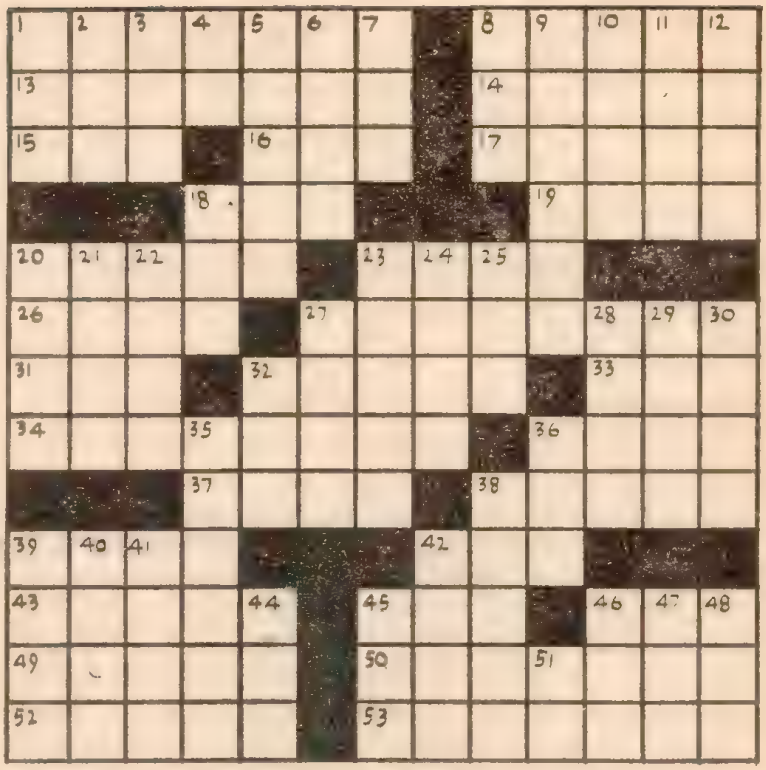
Some outdoorsmen are of the opinion that only the bulls bugle. This isn't true, according to Dr. Olaus J. Murie, world-famed authority on elk. Females will also bugle, but on a lesser scale, during the spring birth period. It appears to be tied up with procreative processes, and the bulls and cows are simply releasing excess energy, or relieving pain. Young bulls also practice bugling.

The elk calves have assorted voices, too. Squeals, short screams and bleats, depending on the conditions and their mood, are frequent among the offspring. The mothers answer in deeper tones, with a resulting hub-bub that makes it easy to follow an elk herd. A short bark is the mother's warning of danger for her offspring.

For those who will listen with interest to the serenade of wild voices, the out of doors will take on new meaning and depth.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE

The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

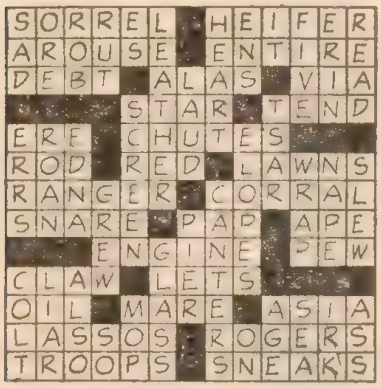


ACROSS

1 Western treeless land
8 Lariat
13 Racers
14 Moving
15 Eventually
16 Building site
17 White patch on horse's face
18 Cooking vessel
19 Grows old
20 Animal away from the herd
23 Parti-colored horse
26 Verbal
27 Quieting a bronc and not spurring
31 Border
32 Cowboy shoes
33 Dove's sound
34 Head cowboys
36 Peter's nickname
37 Lyric poems
38 Female horses
39 Cowboy's boot attachment
42 Organ of hearing
43 Stretched tight
45 To possess
46 To cease to live
49 Consumed
50 Keeps
52 Not poetry
53 Hump-backed cattle

DOWN

1 To snoop
2 To regret
3 Picnic pest
4 Not out
5 To pass along
6 Common metal
7 Established (abbr.)
8 Laboratory (colloq.)
9 Slanting
10 Male deer
11 Dimensions
12 Raw minerals
18 Chum
20 To classify
21 Three singers
22 Inclined way
23 Crosses
24 Dobbin's dinner
25 Donkey
27 Ice cream holder
28 Refrigerator
29 Short letter
30 Departs
32 Not good
35 Cowboys' animals
36 Equality
38 Packsaddle cover
39 Stair
40 Oblong fruit
41 To
42 Water pitcher
44 East-northeast (abbr.)
45 Globe
46 Not bright
47 Girl's name
48 19th letter
51 Sigh of relief



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

USUALLY, whenever he was gone from the ranch for any length of time, Martin Reed would return and be pleased to find Helen Haggerty waiting for him. But on returning this fall day from a cattle drive to the railroad, his ruddy weathered face was set and angry. He was thinking about what he had heard in town, and trying to make sense out of it, when he topped the rise and saw the Bar-T ranch buildings in the distance.

He had been a Bar-T rider for ten years, and had enjoyed it. For five of those years he had been ranch foreman. But today the sight of the big house on the knoll, and the numerous outbuildings, gave him no pleasure. He disliked the thought of doing what he knew he must do. But if there were one thing he had learned from Hugh Haggerty, it was that a man should surmount whatever obstacle confronted him, no matter what or whom it involved.

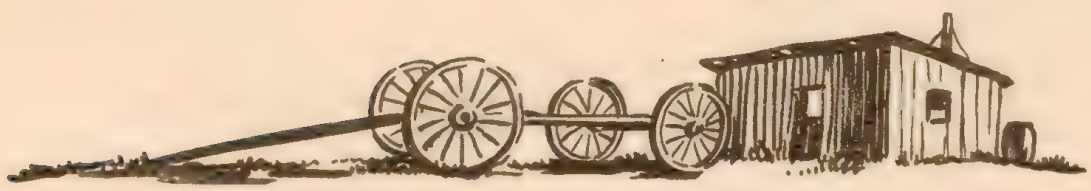
Helen's father had been killed eight months ago beneath the hoofs of his black stallion. It had happened in the ranch yard, when a sheet of newspaper had blown suddenly against the stallion's forelegs. The terrified animal had crawfished, throwing Haggerty. So now Helen owned the Bar-T, and ran it with the help of Martin and a crew of twenty men.

Not to mention Fred Miller, Martin thought bitterly as he turned up the lane. Miller was the accountant who kept the Bar-T books. It was an end-of-the-month task at best, but for a long time now he had been finding excuses to drive out from town three or four times a week. He had no reason, unless it involved Helen. And if this were true, he was stepping across another man's boundary.

For Martin was marrying Helen in the spring. This was something that had been understood even before Haggery was killed, an event Haggerty had looked forward to seeing. Martin found himself thinking of that in a vague sort of way as he entered the yard. He glanced instinctively at the house, but saw no sign of Helen. Miller's buggy was parked below the porch, as Martin had guessed it would be. That makes it just fine, he thought—perfect.

He walked his tired horse past the breaking corral, where two men were at work. The sound of hammering came from the blacksmith shop. Smoke rose from the cook shed and leveled out in the raw wind. A small man leaned against the shed rolling a cigarette. He was a

Rebellious



Nora said, "Martin, I'll be going away next month."

Ramrod

By J. L. BOUMA

MARTIN REED WAS losing his job as foreman to another man . . . and he couldn't be sure Miller wasn't also attempting to take his girl

stranger, Martin noted, probably riding the grub line.

He off-saddled, took care of his horse, then turned the animal loose in the upper pasture. Then he carried his saddle and bridle to the harness room. He was putting his gear where it belonged when Nora Paxton spoke his name in that breathless way she had.

He turned, feeling a sudden glow of pleasure. Nora was twenty, slender and lithe in levis and a green woolen shirt. Her chestnut hair was tied with a bit of ribbon in back, and a smile of welcome lighted her small tanned face.

"Martin, it seems you've been gone longer than two weeks."

"From what I heard in town, I should have returned sooner."

"So you heard," she said, and looked at him with her sensitive eyes that showed all her feelings.

She was Helen's cousin, and had come to live on the ranch two years ago, when her mother died. Martin liked her a lot—more, he had often thought, than he should, considering that in a few months he was marrying Helen.

"Miller," he said, "is getting too big for his britches."

"I hope it doesn't mean trouble."

"He took a big step toward starting it."

"You can fix things," she said, smiling.

He found his own lips shaping a smile, and something she saw in his eyes caused her to blush faintly. They had been together often, for Nora loved to ride, to be present during roundups and at branding time. He had known for a long time that he felt more at ease with her than he did with Helen, who rarely rode but preferred driving a buggy, and who never mixed with the crew.

They came outside. Wind tugged at Nora's hair, and she tossed her head and pushed her hands into the pockets of her levis. Martin found his glance straying to the man who leaned against the cook shed—a small fellow in a greasy buckskin coat and a black hat.

Martin noted the low-slung gun, and the way the man gazed back at him with no expression at all, and he murmured, "Who is that fellow?"

"Someone named Provo. Miller hired him."

So now Miller was taking it upon himself to hire hands for the Bar-T. Martin squeezed Nora's round arm. "Well, I might as well get this over with," he said. He winked at her and strode toward the house.

The door opened as he came up the steps and Helen stood there, nearly as tall as he, with her father's red hair and handsome features, wearing a green gown that showed off the curves of her strong figure.

Martin took his hat off and said, "It's good to be back."

She looked at him searchingly before lifting her face for his kiss. He sensed she was taut and somehow wary. It was something he had often noticed since her father's death. She had inherited Hugh Haggerty's stubborn pride, but not the man's easy confidence. She angered easily, and at times her rage was unjustified. When the stallion had killed her father, she had gone into the house for a rifle and had shot the animal as it stood quivering against the corral gate.

Martin had gone over her character traits more than once, and had come to the conclusion that no one was perfect. He had his own faults. So did everyone else. You had to go along with them, make the best of them. It was something you couldn't escape. There was no other answer.

NOW he straightened and saw Fred Miller's tall figure behind Helen's shoulder. He surprised an expression of half envy, half anger on the man's handsome face. The reason was suddenly obvious, and did not amuse Martin. He knew Miller was an ambitious man, but he had never really considered that this ambition might involve Helen.

He said mildly, "How are you, Fred?"

Miller nodded and took a cigar from his vest pocket. He lit it and said, "Is the crew in town?"

"That's right."

Helen took a seat on the sofa and crossed her hands in her lap. Miller puffed at his cigar.

Martin let the silence run awhile, then said quietly, "I heard about it, so I came right in."

Miller shrugged. "It had to happen sometime."

"Did it?" Martin asked softly. "And what do you think Delbert will have to say about it?"

"He hasn't said—yet," Miller answered, grinning.

Martin looked into the man's eyes until the grin faded, then shifted his gaze to Helen and said, "We'll be moving those cattle back where they belong, on Bar-T grass, in the morning."

Anger flashed in her eyes, and her mouth became set and stubborn. "You might ask me about it first."

"All right, I'm asking."

She glanced quickly at Miller and remained silent. So did Miller. The dismal thought went through Martin that she meant to back the accountant in this business.

It had to do with Green Basin, a natural park rich in grass and water, that stretched between Bar-T and Dan Delbert's Ladder domain. It had begun soon after Haggerty started ranching, when Delbert had been his only neighbor and had claimed Green Basin as part of his holdings.

Then a fierce winter had cut Delbert's herds in half. Haggerty, on the other hand, had suffered little. His shrewd instinct had caused him to sell most of his beef the previous fall, so that when spring rolled around he had enough cash on hand to buy remnants of herds from the hard-hit ranchers up north, most of whom needed ready money in order to stay in business at all.

By June of that year, 15,000 head grazed on Bar-T grass, and Haggerty knew that by the next winter he would need the wild hay and the grass in Green Basin. So he had taken it, and Delbert had been in no position to fight him.

Delbert had tried. Time and again he had attempted to wrest the basin from Haggerty's grip. And though the situation had never developed into an open range war, more than one shot had been fired, and barroom fights between Bar-T and Ladder riders had been a common occurrence.

Then age had mellowed Haggerty. Tired of the endless conflict, he had made his peace with Delbert and had moved his beef out of the basin. It had not been an acknowledgment of defeat, and both ranchers understood this. Friends once again, they had often met in town over a bottle. Martin had been relieved, for a range war between two strong outfits could only end up by hurting them both.

Now it had started again. With Martin absent, Miller had taken it upon himself to push Bar-T beef into the basin, and there was bound to be trouble.

The reek of it reached Martin as he looked at Miller and said, "What possessed you to do it, Fred?"

"You know what our last tally ran, and that we didn't ship enough beef this fall to mean anything," Miller said testily. "We'll be moving down to lower graze before long, and the way things stand now we'll be raking the barn floor for straw to feed our cattle before the winter's over."

"All right," Martin said mildly. "Suppose from now on you stick to your ledgers and your payroll and tally books, huh? Let me worry about range problems. That's my job. You had no business moving into the basin, and you wouldn't have done it if I had been here."

Miller reddened. His eyes flashed sudden hatred. "I was thinking of the ranch. We need that grass in the basin. It's free graze, and if we can take it and hold it, it's ours."

Martin's glance went to Helen. He said, "Well?"

"Fred has a point," she said stiffly. "We're running more cattle than ever before, and we need extra grass. Without it, we're bound to suffer losses during the winter."

"Right now that isn't the point."

She smiled suddenly. "Isn't it, Martin? If we can get through the winter without loss, and the market holds up next year—" She broke off, still smiling fully at him, then added softly. "After all, you have a stake in this, too."

HE KNEW what she meant. It had to do with their coming marriage, and her hint said he should already be considering the ranch as partly his. Now she was using this hold she had on him, and he didn't like it. She was ignoring what it meant to buck Delbert, that he would fight and that men would die. Bitterness moved in him.

He nodded toward Miller and said to her, "Did he talk you into this?"

She paled, and her smile faded. "We talked about it, but I made up my own mind."

"All right, I'll accept that for the moment," Martin said. "But that still isn't the point."

"What are you getting at?" Miller snapped.

Martin ignored him. "Helen," he said, "either I run this outfit or Miller runs it. Which is it to be?"

"You seem to forget that Helen still owns this ranch," Miller said, "and that she's the one to make the decisions."

Martin looked at him and said, "Careful, boy," in a soft voice. He turned back to Helen. "Well? Do we move the cattle, or leave them in the basin?"

"Suppose I say we leave them there?"

"If that's your answer you can start looking for a new foreman."

"That's real loyalty," Miller sneered, and Martin looked at him and saw a hint of triumph on the man's handsome face.

"Why don't you stop crowing?" he said. "Or maybe you'd like to take over my job?"

Miller made a sound of disgust and turned to face the window. Martin looked again at Helen's set face and knew this was a crisis in their lives. But he had his own brand of stubbornness, his own sense of justice, and suddenly he didn't care.

"Well, let's have it," he said.

She made an impatient gesture. He could understand the struggle going on within her, but that didn't seem to matter, either. She had, with Miller's help, made her mind up about this business, and now she was being forced into changing it. Not that she had to, but there was doubt here already, Martin noted, as she cast a quick, inquiring glance at him and then looked away. Her pride was taking a beating, but when she took a ragged breath he knew he had won. But there was nothing sweet in this victory.

"All right, we'll move out of the basin."

Without a word, Miller swung from the window and strode to the table where he'd left his hat. When he turned, a stiff smile showed around his mouth.

"Well, I tried," he said. "And I still think I'm right."

"You're not," Martin said. "And there's one more thing. Don't ever again take it upon yourself to hire hands for this outfit. I do the hiring. And right now I'm about to fire your man Provo, who looks to me like he'd sell his gun to the highest bidder. Did you take him on as a sort of bodyguard, in case Delbert came gunning for you?"

Miller shrugged but did not answer.

"Stick around," Martin told him. "I'll send him up here and you give him a month's wages. Then I'll be going over to see Delbert."

"Why should you?" Helen asked sharply.

"Because I think we owe him an explanation."

Miller said, "He hasn't made a move, so did you ever stop to think that he might be afraid to try?"

"You still haven't given up, have you?" Martin said. "One trouble with you is that you don't know Delbert." He picked up his hat and wheeled out of the house.

Striding toward the cook shed, a brooding bitterness churned in him. Helen had changed more than he cared to admit. He had hoped, the day he left on the cattle drive, that his absence would work in their favor, but it had done just the opposite. He was not sure now that he liked this new Helen.

He had watched her grow from a spindly twelve-year-old into a handsome woman, but he had never felt anything romantic toward her until the day she had returned from a prolonged visit with relatives in the East. It had seemed they had really looked at each other then for the first time. That was how it had started. Now he was not sure of anything any more.

Provo was drinking coffee in the cook shed. He looked up warily as Martin came inside.

"Somebody made a mistake, and you're out of a job," Martin told him bluntly. "Go to the house and collect your wages."

Provo got up slowly. "Not so fast," he said. "I hired on to do a job, and no man tells Kid Provo to haul tail until he finishes that job."

Martin said, "*I'm* telling you. Collect your wages and clear out. I'll be back in a few hours, and I don't want to see you here when I come."

He started to walk out, but Provo followed along at his elbow, saying in a snarling voice, "You can't do that to me, mister. Listen, you need anything done, I'm your man. Hell, I came clear from—"

"Head back there," Martin broke in curtly. "That's all."

"Listen," the small gunfighter went on, still crowding Martin, and now his voice held the edge of a whine. "I do a job right, see! You don't need to pay—"

Martin stopped so abruptly that Provo bumped into him. "Clear out," Martin said.

PROVO stepped back. And now his eyes were expressionless again, and his voice was soft when he said, "That's right, mister, kick me around. Run Kid Provo off your place." He nodded his head slowly, his eyes fastened on Martin's chest. Then he turned and shambled toward the house.

Martin walked on, disgusted. He saw that the two hands at the breaking corral, and Nora, had been watching. Nora was sitting on the top rail, and now she jumped down gracefully and came over to him, sympathy and anxiety in her eyes.

"What happened, Martin?'

"Nothing," he said, and smiled, struck again by the warmth of her nearness. It cheered him, dispelled his dark doubts. On sudden impulse he said, "Like to take a ride?"

"Sure," she said, and ran ahead to get her saddle.

Watching her, Martin wondered if it were really Helen he had always looked forward to coming back to when he had been away. Or was it Nora?

They rode out a half hour later, Nora bundled in a mackinaw and astride her pinto. The cold blustering wind reddened her cheeks. They spoke not at all.

Then finally, she said, "Do you remember, when I first came to the ranch, that you told me about someday having a place of your own?" She was watching him and he nodded soberly, his gaze on the range of wooded hills that bordered Green Basin. "Do you still think about it?" she asked.

He shrugged. He'd had that idea before Helen returned from the East. Since then, the dream of branding his own cattle had faded. And why not? If he and Helen married, he would have his hands full running the Bar-T.

But that wasn't it either. He knew that, somewhere in the back of his mind, the dream still lingered. There wasn't a cowboy worth his salt who wouldn't like to see his own brand on a steer's hide. A man could work another man's cattle and make out, but it wasn't the same. It wouldn't be the same even if he married Helen, for the Bar-T brand would always be Haggerty's.

Nora was still watching him, and he said quietly, "Yes, I think of it every once in a while."

She was silent. And then, "Martin, I haven't told anyone, but I'll be going away next month."

"Going away? You mean for good?"

She nodded, and whatever she felt lay hidden behind her eyes. Something tightened in him when she said, "I'll go back to Springfield and live with Aunt Marie. I can get work there. And I want to be there by Thanksgiving."

He made an effort to smile. "It won't be the same without you."

"I'll miss the ranch."

They rode on. All right, he thought, that's it. You had a glimpse of something and thought about it when you had no right. Now it's gone, so let it be.

They had passed the basin and had picked up the road that led to Delbert's ranch. He reined in where it turned past a rise of aspens the color of frost.

"Better wait here, Nora. I want Delbert free to speak his mind, and what he'll say might burn your ears."

He spurred his horse into a lope, sick at heart and not at all interested in what Delbert had to say. Three men came from the bunkhouse when he entered the yard, but he ignored them and went to Delbert's doorstep.

Delbert came outside at once. He was a husky bachelor of forty, with eyes that could turn ugly when his temper was roused. They looked poisonous now, as Martin smiled and said, "You never know when it might hit, do you? It's a wonder you haven't brought your crew around for a visit."

"I figured I'd wait till you got back, and see what you had to say."

"I'll say it now. We'll be moving our beef in the morning."

That settled it. Delbert swore now and then as Martin told what had happened, but in the end he offered his hand.

"We'll forget it. The only thing I couldn't figure was that the girl let Miller go ahead with it."

"Those things happen."

"Well, you'll be marrying her, and that makes a difference. You and I always got along. And, thinking about it, there's no reason we can't share the basin this winter. I know you're overstocked, so we'll see how it turns out. If it's a mild winter, you might pull through without any trouble. And if worst comes to worst, we can talk about sharing that grass. Just don't move in without my say-so."

That was more than fair. Riding back to where he had left Nora, Martin thought, that's one of the things Helen didn't inherit from the old man—fairness. The fair thing for her to have done after agreeing to Miller's plan was to wait and consult me. She owed me that much.

There had been other times, he recalled, when . . . "Martin! Look out!"

NORA'S scream cut through his thoughts. He had just passed the bend and had a glimpse of her galloping up the slope, as a shot roared above him.

The bullet screamed past the crown of his hat. He flung himself from the saddle and palmed his Colt. Nora was riding hard toward a ridge of rocks.

"Ride back!" Martin shouted.

She didn't. Martin leaped up the hillside, running desperately. Nora had vanished behind the ridge. A face showed between the rocks, a narrow, bearded face, and then the face turned as the hammer of hoofs came again. Nora distracting Provo, forcing his attention. Martin thought, if he hurts her . . .

He scrambled across rocks, saw Nora slash and slash again at the gunman with her quirt. Provo ducked and dodged, then raised his gun.

"Provo!" Martin yelled.

Nora neck-reined the pinto savagely, and Provo stood clear, crouching over. He got off two fast shots before Martin fired, aiming carefully. He watched Provo jerk upright and then fall forward as though the ground had been scooped out from under him.

Nora leaped from her horse. She was crying. "I heard him! Then I saw him up there in the rocks."

She threw herself into Martin's arms. "All right," Martin said gently. "Everything's all right now."

They were silent on the ride back, and he was thinking that this was somehow the end of something. At the ranch, he gave orders that Provo's body be picked up and taken to town. Nora had gone inside, and Martin saw that Miller's buggy was still there.

He walked through the door and Helen said, her voice cross, "What's the matter with that child? She came in looking sick, and went right to her room without speaking."

"She just saw a man killed."

Miller stared and rose slowly. "What?"

"Provo tried to bushwhack me."

"Good Lord," Miller breathed, and glanced at Helen with a face that had suddenly paled. "I hope you don't think—"

"Fred paid him off," Helen said sharply.

"All right," Martin said. "But you sure pulled a blunder, mister. As it happened, it turned out all right, but it might not have. Next time stick to your bookkeeping. Now clear out."

Miller glanced helplessly at Helen, while she glared defiantly at Martin. "You seem to forget this is my house."

"Then let him stay," Martin said wearily.

He realized now that he could never have lived with her willful stubbornness. Now the crisis had come and gone, and the wide river was there between them.

"Maybe it's partly my fault," Martin said.

"We won't fight about it, Martin," she said.

"No," he said, smiling. Then he added, "I'll be around for a while, at least until we find you a new foreman."

"Yes."

He glanced toward the stairs. Nora was up there, and that was a comfort. He knew now why she had planned to go East, that she hadn't wanted to stay for his wedding. But that was all changed now, he thought, as he left the house. He would talk with her in the days to come. They had plenty of time. And in the end she would stay. What else could she do but stay to attend her own wedding?

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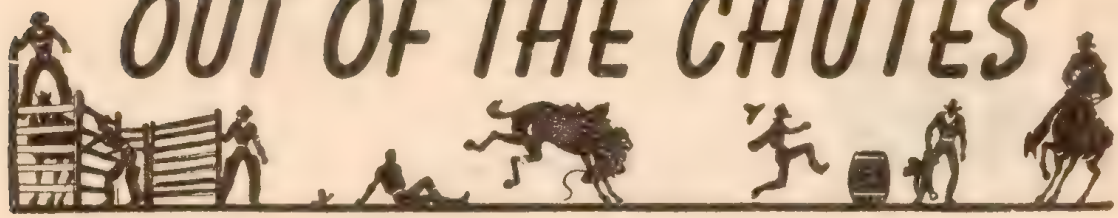
OUT OF THE CHUTES



MAYBE you remember a column in this space a while back about a steer-busting technique known as tailing, or what the vaqueros called *el coleo*. As you might guess, tailing means grabbing the steer by his tail, which you then wrap around your saddle horn till the critter goes down.

This was too cruel a system for the public to see, so it never became a contest event in rodeo. But it was a mighty efficient way of handling a belligerent longhorn on the range.

With the longhorn dying out, tailing became a dead art—or so we thought until lately. But Chuck Walters, writing in *Rodeo Sports News*, describes a one-man tailing exploit which he witnessed less than fifteen years ago. The last previous performance we knew about happened in 1887.

As a matter of fact, that more recent tailing wasn't really a performance. Few people saw it except a few open-mouthed GI's who happened to be around on the day *before* the rodeo at the Kingman, Ariz. Air Base.

"The first, last and only time I ever saw *el coleo*," says Chuck, "was when I was doing manual labor on a rodeo arena at the Air Base."

The man who entered this one-man contest with the local talent was a Tech Sergeant named Larson, a B-24 waist gunner, just back from tangling with the German air force.

Larson's assignment that day was overseeing the construction of the arena and the cattle pens, and his easy-going attitude may have had something to do with the fact that the pens were not equipped with tight gates. It's perfectly possible that Larson secretly wanted the steers to get loose, because, knowing he wasn't highly thought of as a sergeant around there, he wanted to prove he was quite a cowboy.

Anyway, according to Chuck, "Several steers got out, and the GI's on foot were having a rough time rounding them up. They were spavined steers from the Kingman hills, sorry-looking critters, and I don't think there was enough meat on any one steer to glut a baby buzzard."

However, they were plenty quick on their feet, and the unmounted GI's were completely unable to catch them.

"That's when Tech Sergeant Larson swung into action. He was superbly mounted on the only horse available that day, a rat-gray windsucker blind with cataracts. Racing across the flat land of the desert, Larson caught up with one steer after another, grabbed its tail, and with an adroit maneuver tumbled the animal to the ground. It looked easy, even with black hoofs slashing at the steer-buster, but we all knew better."

It remained for the GI contingent to rope the downed steers and drag them off to the reinforced pens. Every one of those critters was so dazed that rounding them up was child's play.

"It seems to me," continues Chuck Walters, "that Larson picked up a little day money in saddle bronc-riding at the rodeo the next day, and I think he won the pony races, though I couldn't swear to it. But the real thrill of the Kingman Air Base Rodeo was never seen in the arena. It was *el coleo* of Tech Sergeant Larson, watched only by a few soldiers on work detail the day before the show."

But those soldiers talked about the tailing over late beers for months, and at least one of the guys who saw it still remembers it vividly, long after the rodeo has been all but forgotten.

Adios,
THE EDITORS

Doublecross Canyon

By Walker A. Tompkins

Jordyce's derringer exploded as Farwell knocked him backward

THE STORY SO FAR: RUCK FARWELL, on the dodge for a murder he didn't commit, is caught by SHERIFF TOM BLADE. He is released when he hears from an old friend, COOKIE BURKEY, that the real murderer has been found. Attracted by LUCE CROCKETT, a girl who's tried to help him, Ruck gets his chance to stay near her when he rescues her and her father, COLONEL PORTEUS CROCKETT, from a flash flood, and is made foreman on the Crockett ranch. BOB FAIN, who had expected to get the job, quits and hires on with Luce's fiance, LON COLE. Later Ruck finds evidence to indicate that someone on Cole's ranch has been rustling. Cole claims it's a frame-up engineered by Crockett, who opposes Cole's marriage to Luce. The matter is left hanging when Ruck gets a message to meet Crockett in a remote spot. Going there, Ruck finds Crockett murdered, and meets a stranger who accuses him of the murder. . . .

PART TWO

OUTRAGE choked Ruck Farwell momentarily, but he checked an intemperate urge to attempt a gun draw. It wouldn't be a smart move, when the stubby barrel of the stranger's derringer was trained on him, at point-blank range.

He flicked a glance at Colonel Crockett's corpse, sprawled grotesquely alongside the rusty stove. Ruck thought, this man's derringer could have put that slug in the old man's back.

Keeping his arms aloft, Farwell turned back to the beaver-hatted man in the doorway. "What do you mean, why did *I* murder

him? I just got to Boundary Gulch. You can tell from the way those bloodstains have clotted that Crockett's been dead for two hours or more."

The man with the derringer took a forward step into the room, keeping his gun trained warily on the Texan.

"Two hours? That I know to be a lie, young man. I was talking to the colonel less than an hour ago. You're Ruck Farwell, his ranch foreman, I take it?"

The Texan nodded. "The same. The colonel sent for me to meet him here. I have the proof of that right here in my—" Farwell broke off, remembering that he had carelessly tossed aside the message which Lon Cole had delivered earlier this afternoon, up at the Rattlesnake Creek roundup camp. He added brusquely, "Who are you?"

The stranger shrugged. "My name, not that it matters in this unfortunate situation, happens to be Jordyce—Newt Jordyce. Am I to gather from your statement just now that you are trying to welsh out of this killing, Farwell?"

"I'm welshing out of nothing. I didn't shoot the colonel, as you damn well know. You must have seen me ride in, water my horse, then come up to this room. I just stepped in here and saw the colonel sitting in this chair."

Newt Jordyce shrugged again. "We can talk this over better if you unbuckle your guns and throw them over here, Farwell. I am what you might call an innocent bystander. If you were not responsible for this old man's death, I only hope you can prove that to the satisfaction of Sheriff Tom Blade, down in Dos Cruces. I will have to report this to the law, of course."

Farwell lowered his arms to his belt buckles, loosened his gun harness, and tossed his holstered Colts on the floor at Jordyce's feet.

"Now, then," Farwell said, "you say you talked to the colonel within the last hour. How come you were around these Indian ruins in the first place, Jordyce?"

Jordyce removed his beaver hat to fan his perspiring cheeks. His balding skull looked bone white in the lantern shine.

"I happen to be camped here, close to water," Jordyce said. "I'm engaged in a business undertaking in this locality. These cliff dwellings offered a handy shelter."

"What kind of business?" Farwell demanded.

Jordyce's teeth glinted in a sardonic smile. "You seem to be asking most of the questions, son. It should be the other way around. However, I have nothing to hide. I am a surveyor, working on a civilian contract with the army down at Fort Bowie. I'm plotting a future telegraph line over Doublecross Canyon. Does that satisfy you as to my legitimacy?"

FARWELL shook his head. "I'm not satisfied by a damn sight, Jordyce. A man's been murdered here and I blundered onto the corpse after the deed. I think *you'll* have some explaining to do when we report this to Tom Blade."

Jordyce's grin widened. "The typical bluff of a killer, caught red-handed. I will admit I did not hear the sound of your gunshot. I was doing some triangulation further up the canyon, trying to establish the true elevation of an old bench mark I found.

"I quit work for the day and came back to these ruins. The fact that another horse was in the stable, along with mine and Colonel Crockett's, made me hurry up here to investigate. And I find you bending over this old man's dead body. What did you expect me to think?"

Confused thoughts milled in Farwell's head. Jordyce's words carried the ring of truth. He hardly appeared to be the cold-blooded type; his self-description of being a civil engineer seemed to fit him. His smooth way of talking betokened an education.

"I was bringing the colonel something," Farwell said. "I'll show you what it was. It may have some connection with his murder."

As he spoke, Ruck Farwell tugged the roll of green calfhide bearing Two Slash's blotted brand out of the waistband of his levis. He tossed the roll of russet hide straight at Jordyce.

Instinctively, Newt Jordyce reached up to catch the flying object. Taking the long gamble, Farwell threw himself at the man's legs

in a knee-level flying tackle. Jordyce's derringer exploded above Farwell's head a split instant before the cowhand's shoulder struck the man and knocked him backward to the floor.

A howl of panic escaped Jordyce's lips as Farwell snatched one of his sixguns from a holster lying on the floor, lifted it over the man's head, and brought the muzzle down in a clubbing arc to Jordyce's temple.

The yell cut off, and Jordyce's eyes rolled up out of sight in their sockets. Farwell came to his feet, panting heavily. A thin rivulet of blood seeped from a cut on Jordyce's scalp, trickling down into the man's yellow mustache.

Stooping to recover his gun harness, Farwell buckled the Colts back on. He jerked the single-shot derringer from the unconscious man's lax fingers and blew smoke from the bore.

He thought, if the coroner in Dos Cruces digs a .41 ball out of the colonel's back, it'll be proof this walloper shot him. He dropped the tiny weapon into his pocket.

Jordyce was a puzzle Farwell couldn't hope to figure out. If he had been camping here when the colonel arrived to keep a rendezvous with his foreman, what reason would a surveyor have to commit murder?

Lifting the lantern off its rafter hook, Farwell had a look around the cliff dwelling room. The dusty floor held plenty of boot tracks, fresh ones. Some of them matched Jordyce's box-toed footgear; the colonel's were also recognizable.

Farwell went over to where Jordyce lay, breathing heavily but still knocked out from the blow on his head. A search of the man's pockets revealed a wallet, which contained at least one source of identification to prove Jordyce had not given a false name—a surveyor's license, made out to Newton K. Jordyce of Phoenix, Arizona Territory.

CARRYING the lantern, Farwell made his way to the door. Night had pooled blackly between the rimrocks of Boundary Gulch; the sky was powdered with a foamy glitter of stars.

A slab door, turning on pivots cut into the lintel and threshold timber, had been installed in this Indian ruin by the cowhands who had used the cliff dwelling for a bunkhouse in years past.

Deciding to go off to reconnoiter for clues, Farwell shut the door to make sure Jordyce would be there when he got back. He thrust a rusty padlock through a hasp in the lock.

Winds had scoured the terrace floor clear of any footprints entering or leaving the room where Porteus Crockett had met his death. Farwell headed down to the floor of the canyon and swung the lantern here and there, studying the hoofprints coming and going from the camp.

There had been quite a bit of horse traffic here recently, but he could be sure only of the tracks from Crockett's incoming horse, and his own. He went up-canyon, past the waterhole. Fordyce had claimed to be working on a survey job up in this direction at the time Crockett was killed. But the sandy bottom of the gulch was smooth and windswept.

"Fordyce was lying," Farwell muttered to himself. "He wasn't up in this direction. He must have been hiding out somewhere in the cliff dwellings when I rode in. By grab, Fordyce must have shot the colonel. A coroner's autopsy can prove whether that derringer was the—"

Ruck broke off his soliloquy as the night suddenly resounded to a drumroll of hoofbeats, back in that direction of the ruins. Dragging a gun from leather, Farwell started back in that direction, knowing a rider was leaving the canyon, headed toward Doublecross. It couldn't be Jordyce, for he was locked in the room with Crockett's corpse.

Dust fouled Farwell's nostrils as he reached the waterhole. He turned in the direction of the stable room on the ground floor of the cliff dwelling, where the dust hung thickest.

The rays of the lantern revealed Crockett's pony and his own line-back dun. Both horses were pawing nervously.

Then Farwell saw that Jordyce's saddle horse was missing from its stall. Someone had made a getaway on the surveyor's bronc—someone who must have been hiding on the premises.

This put a new complexion on things; it might serve to exonerate Newt Jordyce of

any part in the killing. Maybe Jordyce had a partner, a rod man or chain man. Surveyors usually worked in pairs.

Farwell scrambled up the ledge path to the second-story terrace, and raced back to the door. The padlock still hung in the hasp; at any rate, the escaping horseman had made no attempt to rescue Jordyce.

Unlocking the door, Farwell lunged into the room. He saw Colonel Crockett's corpse lying over by the stove. He saw a lizard scuttle along a mud-plastered wall, and vanish behind a double-decker bunk, the lower mattress of which was covered with a bedding roll, probably Jordyce's.

But, where Newt Jordyce had lain unconscious, there was nothing but empty space, and a beaver hat with the initials N.K.J. stamped in gold on the inner band.

JORDYCE was gone. But that was impossible, unthinkable. The ventilation holes in the three-foot-thick rock wall were too small for a man of Jordyce's girth to wriggle through.

Ruck Farwell lifted the lantern high, making a quick survey of the room. But Jordyce was not here. Ruck was alone with Colonel Crockett's dead body. And then he got the answer: a yawning trap in the floor on the far side of the stove, with the top of a pole ladder showing through.

Ruck had remembered too late that Indian cliff dwellings were interconnected, floor to floor, by ladders and trapdoors. He swung his light over the gaping square and found himself looking down into the stable below, where his and the colonel's horses were pawing nervously.

Jordyce came to, Ruck thought, or was playing possum after I belted him on the head. He lit out while I was up-canyon. Ruck felt in his pocket, and was reassured to find Jordyce's .41 derringer there. During his examination of the surveyor's pockets he had satisfied himself that Jordyce did not carry any other kind of weapon.

The lantern flickered out, its fuel tank exhausted. Farwell hung up the lantern, righted the chair Crockett had been sitting in, and sat down to think this thing out.

There had been no time, since his discovery of Crockett's murder, to realize what the old man's death meant to his own fortunes. He realized now that he was finished on Two Slash.

With Crockett dead, the ranch belonged to Luce. And next week she would become Lon Cole's wife. Lazy Ladder and Two Slash would merge, and it went without saying that there would be no future place for Ruck Farwell under such a set-up.

Farwell struck a match, looking around for the chunk of calfhide which he had used as a ruse for breaking up Jordyce's gun drop a few minutes ago. He was almost surprised to find it, lying on the floor near Jordyce's hat. But Jordyce, of course, would have no way of reading the significance of that hunk of green hide.

Before the match flickered out, Farwell glanced down at the colonel's contorted face, wondering if the colonel knew that Lon Cole might have been rustling his stock. A mystery that would probably never be answered was why the colonel had wanted to meet his foreman at this secret rendezvous in the first place. Whatever it was had brought old Crockett to his doom.

Farwell wondered what he should do now. Obviously he had to report this killing to the authorities down at the county seat. Remembering Sheriff Blade's hostility toward him, knowing Blade still regarded him as a suspicious character, Farwell did not relish bearing the news of his boss's death to Blade. But it had to be done.

Should he leave the dead man here for the sheriff and the county coroner to see? Remembering Newt Jordyce, Farwell decided against that. Jordyce would have plenty of time to return to the cliff dwelling and make off with Crockett's body, if it had any guilty connection with the old rancher's murder.

MOVING through the darkness, Farwell hoisted the dead man's inert weight to his shoulder and headed out the door with his grisly burden. The fact that rigor mortis had not stiffened Crockett's limbs was proof that the murder had been committed within the past five or six hours.

He made his way down the sloping path and into the barn. Crockett's saddle horse, scenting death, made it a long job for Farwell to saddle up and get Crockett's body jacknifed in place and tide down.

That job finished, Farwell saddled his own horse and then walked out of the barn, keening the night for any sounds that might indicate that Newt Jordyce was lurking in the canyon's blackness. He heard nothing, saw nothing, only the soft glow of starlight on the cliff dwelling masonry, and the ceaseless honk of the bullfrogs out by the water hole.

He made a return trip to the room upstairs and picked up Jordyce's beaver hat. He could show it to Sheriff Blade, at least, to prove that the surveyor had been on the premises at the time Farwell had discovered Crockett's corpse. That and the derringer in his pocket were the only evidence he had of Jordyce's existence.

He left by way of the trapdoor ladder, into the stable, and dallied the lead rope of the colonel's horse to his own saddlehorn. Mounting, he headed back down Boundary Gulch, lifting his Winchester carbine from its boot in case he ran into Jordyce on the way out.

At the mouth of Boundary Gulch, Farwell dismounted to study the trail sign on the floor-smoothed sands of Doublecross Canyon. Jordyce had reined his horse northward, in the direction of the roundup camp, away from Dos Cruces.

That struck Farwell as significant. If the surveyor had a killing to report, why hadn't he ridden south, toward town and the sheriff's office?

Heading down Doublecross Canyon, the colonel's horse following with its gruesome burden, Farwell remembered something else. Luce was down in Dos Cruces tonight, getting her wedding gown fitted; he doubted if she would make the round trip back to Two Slash in one day. That meant that he faced the unhappy chore of breaking the news of her father's murder to Luce.

Dawn light was staining the outer Arizona desert with crimson when Ruck Farwell saw the clustered shacks of Dos Cruces through the wide mouth of Doublecross Canyon. He saw no sign of life around the cowtown as he crossed the flats, reached Main Street, and turned east toward the courthouse.

Then he saw Andy, the railroad agent, out on the station platform, juggling boxes of freight into a box car standing on the siding. A swamper was sweeping off the porch of the Jim-Dandy Saloon and he lifted his head to stare curiously at the sight of a cowboy on a Two-Slash dun leading another horse with a dead man tied across the saddle. Then the swamper went back to his work. Apparently dead men were no novelty in Dos Cruces.

Farwell turned in at the gates of the courthouse plaza. The barred windows on a brick annex of the courthouse told him where the jail was. In another minute he was dismounting in front of a doorway bearing a sign COYOTERO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

As he was climbing the steps the door opened, and a rawboned oldster with a wooden leg stepped out to meet him. A deputy's tin star glittered on the man's shirt.

"Howdy," Farwell said morosely. "Too early for the sheriff to be around, I suppose?"

The deputy nodded. "I'm Pegleg Pollard, the night jailer. Who's the corpse you're packing in, stranger?"

Farwell winced. "Colonel Porteus Crockett. He was ambushed up in the Burnt Rocks last night—yesterday afternoon, rather."

PEGLEG POLLARD spat out a quid of tobacco and uttered a shocked oath. "The colonel's dead? The hell . . . Who're you, son?"

"I'm his ramrod; I took Jeb Hoskin's place on Two Slash. The name's Ruck Farwell."

Pollard pointed off across the courthouse square toward a building facing Main Street. "Yonder's Winthrop's Furniture Bazaar. Shed in back is the morgue. Saul Winthrop's our undertaker and county coroner. You take the remains of the late colonel over there and hammer on the door of the morgue. Saul sleeps in back."

Farwell headed back toward the horses, Pollard stumping along behind him. The deputy said, "I'll go rouse the sheriff. Any idea who shot the colonel, Farwell?"

The Texan glanced at Jordyce's beaver hat,

lashed behind his cantle. "I've got some ideas, but they may not be the right ones." As Pegleg Pollard hustled off, Farwell called after him, "Any idea where the colonel's daughter might stay overnight? I understand she's in town."

Pollard halted, staring at Farwell. "Why, sure," the deputy sheriff said. "I was talking to her yesterday. She's stopping over at the Drover's Hotel. It's the only flophouse in town. The sheriff lives there too. You want me to rouse Miss Luce and tell her the news?"

Farwell shook his head. He didn't want an uncouth old codger like Pegleg Pollard being the one to break the news of the tragedy to Luce Crockett.

"No, that's my job. You attend to fetching the sheriff."

Pollard nodded and hurried on across the square. Farwell led his horses out to Main Street, rounded the corner of the side street flanking Winthrop's Furniture Bazaar, and hitched to a tie rail alongside the morgue lean-to.

In response to his knock at the morgue door, a white-haired man appeared, thumbing the suspenders of his bib overalls over a flannel nightshirt.

"Dead one?" Winthrop asked, spotting the dead man on the trail pony. "Why, darned if it doesn't look like old Colonel Crockett, with that leather jacket and all."

"It is the colonel," Farwell said shortly. "I've already reported his killing to the sheriff's office. Pollard will be here directly with Tom Blade. Can you help me carry him inside?"

"Sure thing, sure thing. Who did it, cowboy?"

Farwell said, "I'll give you a full report as soon as I've told Miss Luce about her father."

Five minutes later Farwell was helping lay out Crockett's remains on a stone-topped undertaking slab. Winthrop shrouded the body with a soiled sheet, rubbing his hands together as if in anticipation of the official post mortem he would be performing on the body this morning.

Sick at the stomach, Ruck Farwell was glad to get out of the undertaking room into the sunshine again. Winthrop was plying him with excited questions when Sheriff Tom Blade arrived, buttoning up his shirt, hatless and coatless. He was accompanied by Deputy Pollard.

"I knew the minute I heard you'd hired on at Two Slash that you'd bring the colonel bad luck," the lawman snapped, recognizing Farwell. "What happened to the old man—according to you?"

THE coroner crowded up to join the two lawmen as Ruck Farwell described his grisly discovery at the Indian cliff dwellings yesterday.

"You say this Jordyce vamosed after you gun-whipped him," the sheriff said, consulting the notes he had scribbled on a tablet. "What proof have you that there *was* a Jordyce at the scene of this murder?"

Farwell stepped over to his horse and untied the surveyor's beaver hat. He indicated the initials in the sweatband. "I know you don't believe there was another man at those ruins," Farwell said, handing the hat to Blade. "You probably think I carried this hat out from Texas with me and made up a name to fit those initials."

Blade turned the hat over to Coroner Winthrop.

"Take custody of this so-called evidence." Blade sneered. "Any other Clues, Farwell?"

Farwell produced the walnut-stocked derringer from his pocket. Now, on closer examination he made an interesting discovery he had overlooked the night before: the derringer carried the initials N.K.J. engraved on the stubby barrel.

"This was the gambler's gun that Jordyce drew on me," Farwell said, passing the derringer over to Saul Winthrop. "It may or may not be the murder weapon. You'll be digging the slug out of the colonel's back, won't you?"

The undertaker nodded. "I'll get at it soon as the sheriff gives me the go-ahead, son."

Farwell said, "Notice the derringer is chambered for one .41 calibre cartridge. You can tell the caliber of the ball that killed Crockett, can't you?"

"Yeah," Winthrop agreed. "If it's a .41, I'd say you had a point in your favor, son."

Ruck Farwell turned away, suddenly beginning to feel the effects of loss of a night's sleep and his long, slow journey down out of Doublecross Canyon.

"Hold on!" snapped Tom Blade, dropping a hand to his thonged-down Colt. "Where do you think you're going? You're our key witness in this deal."

Farwell bit his lip. "The colonel's daughter is staying over at the Drover's Hotel. Naturally she has to know what happened."

Blade shook his head. "I'm placing you in jail pending a coroner's inquest, Farwell. For all I know, maybe you shot the colonel with that derringer."

Despair touched Farwell, but it didn't show in his eyes. "I spent two years on the dodge for a murder I didn't commit, as you well know, Sheriff. You're not going to pin another frame-up on me."

The coroner spoke up timidly. "The girl's got to know, Tom. It'd be cruel not to let this guy tell her."

Tom Blade appeared to think that over. Finally he said, "Farwell can go over to the hotel on two conditions. Pegleg, you go along with him. Don't let him out of your sight for a minute, in case he takes a notion to streak for the border."

Farwell said after a pause, "What's the other condition?"

BLADE held out his hand. "I impound your shooting irons and hold your horse here. Take your choice. Go over to Miss Luce's room on my conditions, or go to jail—which is where you're winding up eventually, in either case.

Wearily, Farwell unbuckled his guns and hung the cartridge belts over his saddle horn. He said to Pegleg Pollard, "Come on, Deputy. I won't give you any trouble."

Tom Blade and the coroner disappeared into the morgue as Pollard and Farwell headed toward Main Street. They turned west half a block, and Pollard led the way into the deserted lobby of the Drover's Hotel.

Pollard limped over to the reception desk and had a look at the hotel register book. "Lucinda Crockett, Room F," mumbled the deputy. "That'll be upstairs."

Pollard kept a sixgun palmed as he followed Ruck Farwell upstairs. At the door marked F, Farwell halted and knocked lightly. He heard bedsprings squeak, and a moment later heard bare feet padding across an uncarpeted floor to reach the door.

Luce Crockett's sleepy voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Ruck Farwell, ma'am. Your new foreman."

After a pause the door opened and Luce appeared, wrapping a plum-colored bathrobe over her filmy nightgown. Her hair was done up under a tightly-knotted scarf, and her eyes showed that she had been roused from a deep sleep.

"Ruck—and Pegleg!" Luce said, the sight of the gun in the deputy's hand bringing her fully awake. "Is anything wrong?"

Farwell twisted his Stetson in his hands. He glanced at the deputy. "Is there any objection to my stepping inside with Miss Crockett for a few words in private?"

The deputy shrugged bony shoulders. "Tom gave orders to keep you in sight. You can go in, son, but leave the door open."

"Ruck!" Luce Crockett gasped, stepping back to let Farwell come into the room. "What's happened? Are you in trouble?"

More miserable than he could ever remember being, Farwell gestured for the girl to seat herself on the bed. He drew up a cane-bottomed chair and straddled it, facing her. Out in the hallway, Pegleg Pollard was whittling himself a fresh chew of tobacco, leaning against the opposite wall where he could keep an eye on his prisoner.

"Luce," Farwell said, "I'd rather take a horse-whipping than tell you what I'm in town for. Luce . . . your father—"

The girl leaned forward, gripping his arm. "He's—had a heart attack? The doctor said the next one would—kill him—"

"He's dead, Luce, but—it wasn't a natural death."

He saw the girl take the shock like a thoroughbred, letting go of his arm and folding her hands in her lap, steeling herself for what had to come.

In halting sentences, he told her of Lon Cole's delivery of her father's message, up

at the Two Slash roundup camp yesterday. He described his arrival at the Boundary Gulch Indian ruins, his discovery of the colonel's death by violence, Jordyce's appearance and subsequent escape, his own sad journey back to town to report to the sheriff and the coroner.

"That's about it, ma'am," he wound up. "Tom Blade, of course, will do his best to pin this killing on me. You see," he went on hesitantly, "I came to Dos Cruces under a shadow."

LUCE interrupted gently, her eyes dry of tears but her face betraying the depth of her grief. "I know about you, Ruck. Dad told me about that old charge of murder in Texas, and the proof you showed him of your innocence."

Relief flowed through Ruck Farwell. "I don't know," he murmured, "why your Dad sent for me. I threw away his note, which I shouldn't have done. It said something urgent had come up that he had to talk over with me."

The girl stood up and took a turn around the room, ignoring the deputy sheriff posted out in the corridor. Finally she halted and turned to face him.

"Ruck," she whispered, "I think I know what Dad was going to tell you. Did you know I'm getting married to Lon Cole next week?"

Farwell nodded bleakly. Luce went on in a strained voice.

"Dad was going to tell you something he'd already told me, three days ago."

Ruck looked up, dismayed at the tone in the girl's voice. "What, Luce?"

Luce Crockett sat down on the bed facing him. "Dad hated Lon Cole. He told me if I went ahead with the marriage over his objections, he would disown me. He said Lon would never marry me if he knew that Two Slash didn't go along as my dowry."

Farwell's jaw sagged open. There had been enough sign, visible even to an outsider like himself, for him to know that Colonel Porteus had stood ready to do almost anything to block his daughter's marriage to the Lazy Ladder boss. But when it came to disinheriting Luce, that was hard to realize.

"He'd never have done that, Luce," Farwell heard himself saying gently. "That was just talk."

The girl shook her head. "Dad made a new will," she said. "His lawyer, Micah Venable, made a special trip out to the ranch Monday to help Dad prepare it. I saw the will. He showed it to me." The girl's voice broke. "He disinherited me. But I told him nothing could stop me from marrying Lon—nothing, even that."

Tears rolled from the girl's eyes for the first time. "I came to town yesterday," she said, "to get my wedding gown made. Dad knew that. That's why he sent for you, Ruck—to tell you about that will."

Farwell spread his hands in a dismayed gesture. "But why tell me, just because I'm his foreman?" he blurted puzzledly. "It's none of my business what happens to the ranch in the event you become Mrs. Lon Cole."

The girl wiped her eyes and got herself under control. "You were very much concerned, Ruck," she whispered gently. "You see, now that Dad's gone, Two Slash is yours. He made you his beneficiary."

The girl's bombshell made the room rock before Ruck Farwell's eyes. The enormity of this development was too much for him.

"That can't be true," he said. "The colonel wasn't in his right mind. He was bluffing. He'd never bequeath his life's work to a stranger."

A smile touched Luce Crockett's lips. "It *is* true, Ruck. The moment Dad died you became full owner of Two Slash. You'd have to know the colonel a long time to understand that, Ruck. You see, I was all he had, and you saved my life in that flash flood, and risked your own at suicidal odds to save his. Dad was sound of mind when he signed that last testament. Whether you like it or not. Two Slash is yours."

FARWELL got unsteadily to his feet. "But I can't be a party to such a deal, Luce," he said earnestly. "I'll look up this Venable, the lawyer. I'll deed the spread back to you and your husband, of course."

Luce's shoulders lifted and fell. "I knew you'd say that," she whispered. "But can't

you see, I couldn't accept Two Slash under those terms? I loved Dad sincerely, as much as any daughter could possibly love a father. Why, he was my mother as well as my father. There was never a harsh word between us until I became engaged to Lon."

Farwell stepped over to the window and stood staring out at the Mexican hills beyond the railroad tracks. He was remembering how his prime ambition in life had been to have a ranch of his own someday, and a brand of his own. Now, through a strange, melodramatic quirk of fate, one of the finest working ranches in southwestern Arizona had been handed to him on a silver platter.

He turned to face the girl sitting on the bed. "What," he asked reluctantly, "was your Dad's objection to your marrying Lon Cole? He seems to have everything a man could want in a son-in-law. He was handsome, well-fixed, young."

The girl smiled without mirth. "My Dad was the most stubborn, most lovable old goat who ever drew breath. He was loyal to his friends to the point of fanaticism. But when he hated a man he hated him viciously. Dad was that way about my future husband."

"But why?" Ruck insisted. "He must have had a reason."

Luce shrugged. "Dad thought Lon was a rustler, but he never had actual proof—only veiled accusations that Jeb Hoskins kept making. Jeb tried to convince Dad that Lon adopted the Lazy Ladder as his brand because it could easily be made from a Two Slash."

"And Jeb was absolutely r—" Farwell bit off his words. What good could come, at this late date, of telling Luce Crockett that he had dabbed his loop on a brand-blotted calf yesterday, proving that Jeb Hoskin's suspicions had been correct? Why produce the evidence he had in his saddlebag, to blacken the name of the man this girl would be marrying in a few days?

The colonel's tragic death had sealed his lips on that score, Farwell knew. He, Farwell, was in no position to condemn Lon Cole. It would only make Luce hate him for betraying the truth. And as Cole had said yesterday, maybe he was being framed into a brand-blotting charge. Such things were hard to prove unless you caught a man in the act of changing a brand.

The heavy strike of boots sounded in the outer hall and Sheriff Tom Blade came into the room, accompanied by Winthrop. Blade had a drawn Colt in his hand. Catching sight of Farwell over by the window, the lawman swept the gun up to a level pointing, one thumb dogging the hammer to full cock.

"Miss Crockett," Blade said heavily, "you've been talking with your father's murderer. I should never have let him come here with only a peglegged cripple like my deputy to guard him."

LUCE CROCKETT came to her feet, crying out in protest as she saw sheriff stalk grimly past the bed and thrust his six-gun in Farwell's ribs.

"Tom, stop talking crazy! You've been trying to pin something on this man ever since he stepped off the train with me that day."

Numbly, Ruck Farwell became aware that Blade had whipped a pair of handcuffs out of his hip pocket. In the next instant one of the iron bracelets snapped shut over Ruck's left wrist. A hard jerk and a click of the second fetter, and the Texan found himself manacled.

"Yeah?" jeered Blade. "You'll talk differently when you hear what the coroner has to report, young lady."

Luce turned, white faced, to Saul Winthrop. "Saul, what is Tom Blade trying to say?"

The undertaker reached in a pocket and drew out an envelope. From it he shook a piece of paper and a blob of lead, which he held up for Luce to see.

As the girl recoiled from sight of the misshapen bullet, Saul Winthrop said, "I dug this .45 slug out of your father's back not ten minutes ago, Miss Luce." Turning to face Farwell, the coroner jeered, "It isn't a .41 ball out of a derringer, like you tried to make me believe I'd be finding. It's a .45, most likely out of one of the guns you surrendered to Sheriff Blade this morning."

Luce Crockett shrilled into the following silence, "So a .45 killed Dad. That doesn't prove a thing, even if Ruck's guns were that

caliber. Nine out of ten sidearms in Arizona are chambered for .45 ammunition."

The sheriff grinned evilly. "Show Luce the note you found in the colonel's leather jacket, Saul."

Smirking, the coroner handed Luce the folded bit of paper he had taken from the envelope with the murder slug.

Ruck Farwell saw the girl's eyes shuttle over the paper, then lift to meet his. Crossing the room, Luce handed the paper to him, and he lifted his fettered hands to receive it.

"Is this your handwriting?" the girl asked.

Ruck stared at the paper. It was identical to the paper which Colonel Crockett had used in writing him the message which Lon Cole had delivered at the roundup camp yesterday. It must have been torn from the same tablet. It read:

> Colonel Crockett,
> Something urgent has come up out here in the field. Must see you at once. Suggest you meet me halfway, at the Indian ruins line camp in Boundary Gulch. Am sending this to you by a grubliner, Mr. Jordyce. Don't fail to meet me at the cliff dwelling by sundown.
> Your foreman, Ruck Farwell.

Ruck looked up to meet the sheriff's malevolent gaze. "You found this on the colonel's body?"

Blade gestured toward the coroner. "I didn't; Saul did, when he was examining the body. It's the bait you used to suck the old man into a gun trap, isn't it?"

Ruck stared down at the paper. "This Mr. Jordyce—he's the army surveyor I told you about."

The sheriff's grin widened. "Sure, you couldn't deliver the note yourself, so you hired a grubliner to take it down to Two Slash to the colonel."

Ruck felt Luce Crockett's hand on his arm. "Ruck, I asked you, is that your handwriting?"

VERY slowly, he shook his head. "If I'm guilty of ambushing your father, wouldn't I say this was a forgery, Luce?"

"It *is* a forgery, then?"

"On my word of honor, I never wrote this, Luce."

Luce turned away, then wheeled back to face Ruck. "You didn't have any conversation with Lon Cole about what I told you, did you? I mean, about Micah Venable's visit to Two Slash?"

"No."

The denial sounded flat, unconvincing, even in Ruck's ears. He knew what Luce was driving at. If he had killed her father, he had to have a motive. He had to know that he would benefit by such a murder. In order to win a prize like Two Slash ranch, killing Colonel Crockett before he could change his mind and cancel his impulsively-made bequest was the only way to handle it.

"No, Luce," he added. "Lon didn't mention anything about your father's plans for Two Slash."

Luce nodded, accepting his word wholly and without reservation; her cold glance at Sheriff Blade told him that. "I suppose you'll be marching this man off to your stinking jail now, Tom?"

Blade chuckled gutturally. "You're right as rain about that, ma'am. This man murdered your father. He'll hang for it."

Luce said in an aloof tone, "As a prisoner, he has a right to counsel. You can't object to my sending Micah Venable over to talk to Ruck, can you?"

Tom Blade looked abashed. "I declare, Miss Luce, you sound like you're insulted because I've caught on the man who shot your Dad in the back."

Tears sparkled in the girl's eyes. She said in a choked voice, "Ruck didn't kill Dad. No matter what crooked evidence you dig up to the contrary, I'll never believe he killed Dad. Why, I saw him almost sacrifice his life to save my father, when that flash flood hit us in the Doublecross two weeks ago."

Blade grinned brutally. "Maybe," he hinted slyly, "Ruck had cause to want the colonel six feet under. Maybe he stood to benefit by having Crockett out of the way. All that will come out at the trial, young lady. As an officer of the law, my duty is cut out for me."

Luce and Ruck exchanged glances. Did the sheriff know about the changed will? If so, he could have obtained that knowledge from

any of three sources—from Crockett himself, from Lon Cole, or from the rancher's lawyer, Micah Venable.

Blade seized Ruck by the elbow. "Come on," he said. "We're heading for the jail. Saul, ride herd on this note. It'll be prime evidence against the defendant when this case hits Judge Corbin's docket."

The cell was a brick-walled, iron-doored cubicle in the jailhouse basement, below the regular cellblock on the ground floor. It had not been cleaned in years, and the only ventilation came from the flight of stairs leading down from Blade's office.

Ruck Farewell rolled and lighted a cigarette, but it tasted sour on his tongue. He was stretching out on the mouldy straw mattress of the cell cot when he heard a tramp of boots coming down the steps, followed by the grate of a key in the iron door. By the murky light of a ceiling lamp, Ruck Farwell saw the door open to admit Sheriff Tom Blade.

WITH the sheriff was a tall, meatless man in a pleated linen shirt, rusty Prince Albert, and striped pants. He had a bearded, Lincolnian cast of features, and his eyes were gentle behind rimless spectacles which gave him a severe look.

"You have twenty minutes, no more," growled the sheriff. "By that time I'll have my horse ready to pull out for Boundary Gulch to investigate this wild-goose tale about Jordyce."

The tall man tucked a scarred briefcase under his arm. "Twenty minutes with my client should be quite sufficient for the time being, Tom."

When Blade had left, the visitor drew up a chair outside Ruck Farwell's cell and thrust a bony hand through the strapiron latticework to accept the prisoner's grip.

"I'm Micah Venable, personal attorney to the late Colonel Crockett. Miss Luce asked me to drop by."

Ruck grinned bleakly. "I'm obliged, sir. I was in hopes you might bring Miss Crockett with you."

"Luce's father will be buried day after tomorrow. She has to ride back to the ranch to pick up his Sunday suit for the undertaker. She has already left for Two Slash."

Ruck said, "I'm in a bad jam, Mr. Venable. I suppose all clients start off by claiming they're innocent as babies?"

The lawyer smiled. "Yes. But if Luce Crockett is willing to believe you are innocent of her father's murder, I am quite willing to go along with that. Please consider me your friend, Mr. Farwell."

Farwell found himself drawn to this courteous, Victorian-mannered oldster. "It was quite a shock to me, Mr. Venable, finding out the colonel had changed his will in my favor. That will have to be canceled, of course. Even if I get out of this murder charge with a whole hide, I couldn't accept the legacy."

Venable's brown eyes warmed behind the austere glasses. "Such an attitude speaks well of your character, Mr. Farwell. Whether we can convince Miss Crockett that she should accept her father's ranch from you, of course, is something else again. Miss Luce inherited the colonel's stubborn streak, I am afraid."

Farwell rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Speaking man to man, do you think Tom Blade is going to have the pleasure of hanging me, Mr. Venable?"

The lawyer looked away. "Assuming that I will defend you at your trial—"

"That goes without saying, sir."

"Thank you. I must admit that things look rather black for our case. You had the motive to murder the colonel, since he had made you beneficiary under his new will."

"But I didn't know a thing about that. I was out on roundup when he drew it up," Ruck protested. "I didn't know Two Slash was my ranch until an hour ago."

Venable smiled patiently. "Tom Blade and the county prosecutor, of course, will claim that the colonel told you about his legacy when you two met out at the Boundary Gulch cliff dwelling. They will follow the line of reasoning that you realized the old man was acting in a fit of temper when he disinherited his daughter, and that when he had time to think it over—especially when Luce's marriage to Lon Cole became an accomplished fact—in all likelihood he would change the will back to Luce's favor."

RUCK said heavily, "So I struck when the iron was hot and bushwhacked the old man. But he was dead when I discovered him. Besides," Ruck added, "those letters were forgeries. At least the one found on the colonel, bearing my signature, was a forgery. Like a fool, I threw away the note he gave Lon Cole to deliver to me. For all I know, maybe it was counterfeit too."

Venable settled back in his chair, drumming his nails on the polished surface of his briefcase. "I'll tell you about Luce's romance with Lon Cole. Colonel Porteus was a proud man. He didn't want his daughter growing up to fall in love with some ordinary thirty-a-month cowhand who might marry her with the prospect of inheriting Two Slash. That's why he sent her back East to school. He hoped she'd meet a man worthy of her."

"But Lon Cole came along and put the kibosh on that?"

Venable nodded. "As you know, Cole is young, handsome, and has a certain dash of the cavalier about him. He moved onto Lazy Ladder six years ago, when Luce was just a pigtailed tomboy. She's twenty now. He started courting her when she was seventeen. Last year she accepted his diamond ring."

"But the colonel didn't approve," Ruck cut in. "I have something to tell you, Mr. Venable, something I couldn't tell Luce this morning. You must promise to keep it confidential."

Venable said drily, "I find myself in the position of representing both you and Miss Crockett. However, anything you tell me is strictly between us."

Rapidly, Ruck Farwell described his discovery of the misbranded leppie up in Rattlesnake Canyon, and the hide which was stowed in his saddlebag containing irrefutable proof that Lazy Ladder had vented a brand that had originally been Two Slash.

When he had finished, Venable said, "I am not violating a dead man's confidence when I tell you that both Jeb Hoskins, his former foreman, and Colonel Crockett were well aware of Lon Cole's brand-blotting. However, they could never catch Cole or one of his men in the act. Cole always insisted someone, hinting that it was the colonel himself, was trying to discredit him in Luce's eyes."

"Did Luce know that?"

"Yes," the lawyer said. "But it just got her dander up. It made her all the more determined to go through with the wedding. She felt the colonel was treating her like a baby instead of a full-grown woman. I almost wonder if she isn't marrying Cole just to assert her independence. The colonel was a strict parent when she was growing up, you understand. Lon Cole was actually her first and only suitor."

The basement door slammed open and Tom Blade stepped into the room. "I'm pulling out for Boundary Gulch, Venable," the sheriff snapped. "Going to see if I can cut this Newt Jordyce's sign. That means I have to lock up the jail now."

Venable came to his feet, his jaw firming. "As Mr. Farwell's lawyer, I must insist that he be permitted to ride with you—in irons, of course—to assist you in locating any clues. He is in a better position than you would be."

Blade shook his head. Before he could speak, Venable said firmly, "To refuse a man that privilege wouldn't look well when I report it in court, Sheriff. I will ride along with my client. To refuse our request would be tantamount to admitting that you had preordained Mr. Farwell of being guilty."

PURPLE color suffused the sheriff's face, but it was obvious to Ruck Farwell that he was in awe of Micah Venable. "All right, he'll ride with us," Blade consented grudgingly. "I won't believe this Jordyce hombre even exists until I lay eyes on him."

Blade unlocked the cell, snapped his handcuffs on Farwell, and led the way upstairs and out of his office.

"The prisoner's horse is in the county barn out back," Tom Blade said. "Be ready to ride by the time we get his nag saddled up, Venable."

Venable hurried off to get his own horse. Out in the county barn, at one corner of the courthouse square, Farwell stood by while the sheriff saddled up his Two Slash gelding.

Mounting Farwell reached back with a leg

to press his knee against one of his cantlebags. It was flat, empty. But this morning, when he had left the horse tied to the rack alongside the morgue, it had contained a rather bulky object—the green calfhide bearing the evidence of Lon Cole's brand-blotting.

"What became of the property I had in my saddlebag, Sheriff?" Farwell demanded belligerently, as they rode out of the barn, Blade mounted on a magnificent palomino stallion bearing the Twin C brand of Coyotero County.

"Coroner Winthrop and I inspected your saddlebags. They were empty."

"Empty."

Blade's malicious eyes sparkled with secret triumph as he returned Farwell's angry stare without blinking. "Empty. Why? You missing a sack of Durham maybe?"

Micah Venable, mounted on a ribby steeldust gelding, came riding across the plaza to join them. Farwell said to the lawyer, "The hunk of hide I was telling you about seems to have disappeared, Mr. Venable. The sheriff says it wasn't in my *alforja* pouch when he and the coroner inspected them."

Venable said pointedly, "We'll have to take our esteemed sheriff's word for that, won't we?"

Nothing more was said as the three riders headed out of town toward the entrance of Doublecross Canyon. Venable and Farwell rode stirrup by stirrup, the sheriff in the lead. The theft of the brand-blotting evidence gnawed at Farwell's mind. Either the sheriff or the coroner had made away with that damning bit of cowhide. Why?

Two hours later, deep in Doublecross Canyon the three riders from Dos Cruces heard a drumroll of hoofs approaching them, and reined up as they caught sight of two riders coming.

"That's Lon Cole on the black," drawled Sheriff Blade. "Who's that with him, the bareheaded one?"

As Cole and the other rider approached, Ruck Farwell said in an undertone to Venable, "That's the army surveyor, Newt Jordyce."

Venable's cottony brows lifted in astonishment. He removed his glasses to peer at the oncoming riders. Then he said drily to Sheriff Blade, "Looks like my client didn't make up

TALL TALES FROM THE LOW COUNTRY

SURE 'nough cowboys—and believe it or not, there still are a lot of them—are pretty unfond of any kind of work they cannot do on horseback. The manager of a big New Mexico ranch had decided to build a lot of new fence and was gently breaking the news to his cowpuncher crew that they would have to dig the post holes.

"The last outfit I rode for," said a saddle-bowed buckaroo solemnly, "always sent off to Monkey Ward and bought their post holes ready made."

"I've sent in my order," replied the manager without cracking a smile. "The ready-made post holes will be here any day now, and all you boys will have to do is scoop out a few places to set 'em in!"

OLDTIME cowboys were never noted for being talkative, and there are at least a few of the breed left. Assuming the managership of a big New Mexico cattle ranch, a friend of mine rode out to look things over with the weathered old cowhand who had been wagon boss on the ranch for nearly 30 years. Noting that the ranch was well equipped with pasture fences, the new manager asked the wagon boss a casual question.

"How many gates do you reckon there are altogether on the ranch, Bill—about 100?"

Knowing the breed, the new manager took no offense at his failure to get an immediate answer. Nearly two hours later, as they paused to breathe their horses on a steep mesa climb, Bill turned briefly in his saddle.

"91," he said, and resumed his silence.

——*Sam Brant*

Jordyce out of whole cloth, after all. That's him coming with Lon Cole, Tom."

THE oncoming riders, apparently recognizing the three horsemen coming up-canyon toward them, broke into a a gallop, reining up before Sheriff Blade in a cloud of dust. Lon Cole's voice carried a wild note of exultation as he caught sight of Ruck Farwell's handcuffs glinting in the sunlight.

"We just passed Luce Crockett, heading home to pick up the colonel's Sunday clothes to bury him in, Tom," Cole panted. "She told me you had this killer in custody. How come you're bringing him up into this country?"

Blade said sourly, "Lawyer Venable here insisted on it. I was coming up to hunt for Newt Jordyce's sign. Is this stranger him?"

Newt Jordyce reined his horse—the apaloosa gelding with which he had made his escape from the Boundary Gulch ruins—up alongside Tom Blade's stirrup.

"I am indeed Newt Jordyce, Sheriff. Mr. Cole and I were on our way to Dos Cruces to report Colonel Crockett's murder."

Micah Venable said in the sharp tone of an attorney cross-examining a hostile witness, "How does it happen you're so late heading for town, Mr. Jordyce? You left Boundary Gulch ahead of Mr. Farwell here. He reached town with the news at daylight."

Jordyce grinned, reaching up to finger the ugly welt which Farwell's gun had cut in the scalp above his left ear.

"At the time of my flight from Boundary Gulch, sir," the surveyor said quietly, "I was in terror of my own life. For all I knew, a desperate criminal might be following me. So I turned north, seeking the nearest habitation—in other words, Mr. Cole's Lazy Ladder ranch. That is where I spent the night."

Farwell grinned bitterly. "I suppose you told Lon Cole I had bushwhacked my boss, Jordyce?"

Jordyce's eyes widened with well-feigned innocence.

"Of course I told him what I knew. After all, the late Colonel Crockett was to have been Mr. Cole's father-in-law."

Sheriff Blade lifted a hand for silence. "Suppose you give me your version of what happened up at the Indian ruins, Jordyce. I've heard Farwell's yarn about how and why he knocked you out and how you gave him the slip. What really happened?"

Jordyce spread his pudgy hands. "Why, it won't take long in the telling. Farwell arrived at the cliff dwelling an hour or so after the colonel. He found the old man asleep in his chair in the bunkroom. He stepped up behind the colonel and shot him in the back. That's all."

Jordyce's voice made Farwell stiffen in the saddle. Yesterday, Jordyce had accused him of murdering Crocktet, but had admitted being away from the Indian ruins, out of earshot of the murder gun. Now he had switched his story to that of an eye-witness of a cold-bloooded murder.

Tom Blade hipped around in saddle to peer at Farwell. "Looks like the investigation's over before it had time to start," he jeered. "We might as well head back to town."

Venable spurred his horse up between Farwell's and the sheriff's. "Just a minute," the lawyer said. "Jordyce, what were you doing in those cliff dwellings at the time you say my client murdered Colonel Crockett?"

Jordyce and Lon Cole exchanged brief glances. "As I have already explained to Mr. Cole, I was using the Indian ruins as a base camp while carrying out a preliminary survey for an army telegraph line over the pass. I was bunking in the adjoining room when I heard Farwell arrive. I stepped around the bunkroom door in time to witness the foul deed."

Farwell shook his head in despair. He said to Venable, "Looks like the deck's been stacked well in advance. No point in arguing about it here."

Venable nodded slowly. He glanced at the sun, low in the west. "I suggest," he said, "that we spend the night at Two Slash. Miss Crockett wants me to look over her father's papers. Our horses are tired. It's a long trip back to town."

Blade shrugged. "All right by me. Jordyce, or whatever your name is, I have to hold you as a key witness."

Jordyce smirked. "With your permission,

Sheriff, I should like to be granted the freedom to carry on my work until such a time as Farwell's court trial convenes. If you'll release me on my own recognizance, you can always find me at the Indian ruins of an evening."

Lon Cole spoke into the silence that followed. "I'll vouch for Jordyce's being available when he's needed, Tom. I know the man. He's visited the ranch several times this summer."

Again Tom Blade nodded his consent. "The whole case against Farwell will hinge on your repeating your eye-witness testimony before a jury, feller. You're free to carry on with your work as long as you don't leave the county."

Jordyce rubbed his sore skull again. "Sheriff, I assure you it will be a pleasure to help the cause of justice in this case."

NIGHT had come to Two Slash. In the bunkhouse, Tom Blade had handcuffed Ruck Farwell to the bedframe and had climbed into the bunk above his prisoner's. Micah Venable, borrowing bedding from Luce Crockett, would occupy an adjoining bunk.

Riding up Doublecross Canyon that evening, Newt Jordyce had left them at the mouth of Boundary Gulch, to return to the scene of Crockett's murder. Lon Cole had accompanied the others back to Two Slash, and had helped Luce prepare supper for the entire group.

Venable finished with spreading his blankets, said to his disconsolate client, "I'll step over to the house for a consultation with Miss Crockett. She'll be going back to town with us tomorrow for her father's funeral."

Farwell nodded hopelessly. "By now," he said glumly, "she's probably ready to believe I killed her father, like Jordyce said."

Venable paused in the bunkhouse doorway to shoot a glance at the sheriff, who was sprawled out on his bunk smoking a cigar. "A lawyer who has practiced as long as I have," he said, "can spot a liar the moment he opens his mouth. And Jordyce is the most unconvincing liar I have ever met."

[*Turn page*]

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Tom Blade chuckled and puffed smoke rings at the bunkhouse ceiling. "Jordyce's testimony can send Farwell to the gallows. It's up to you to prove on the witness stand that he's lying, Venable. I'm just a sheriff. Defending killers isn't my responsibility."

On his way to Luce's ranch house, Venable met Lon Cole. Cole said irritably, "Luce has practically collapsed, Mike. If you're going in to see her, don't. She just now asked me to get out. She's not up to the ordeal of talking to anyone."

Venable said quietly, "I can quite understand. I am merely going to pick up certain papers which I will need as executor of the colonel's estate."

Cole reached out to seize the lapel of Venable's coat. "I'm telling you, don't go over to the house. Tonight isn't the time to be pestering the girl."

Venable slapped the rancher's hand away from his coat. "Let me remind you that Luce requested me to come over to her father's office before she retired. Out of my way, Lon."

Cole muttered an oath, holding his ground. Venable calmly sidestepped the big man in the path and headed on across the yard and into the front room of the ranch house. He found Luce Crockett seated before a well-kept rolltop desk in her father's ranch office. As Lon Cole had reported, she was in bad shape, her eyes swollen from weeping, her face pale.

"Perhaps our discussion of the colonel's affairs can wait until after the funeral, Luce," the old lawyer said tenderly.

The girl motioned him to draw up a chair. She recovered her composure with a visible effort. "Please stay, Mike. I've been going through Dad's personal file. I've discovered something that will just drive me crazy if I can't discuss it with you. It can't wait."

Drawing up a chair, Venable sat down beside the girl. She opened a drawer and drew out a calf-bound book which she handed him, opening it to a certain page.

"This is Dad's diary," she said. "He's kept a daily journal since long before I was born. I'd like you to read the last entry he made, a few minutes before he left for Boundary Gulch to meet Ruck Farwell."

Putting on his glasses, Venable started reading Porteous Crockett's copperplate Spencerian writing:

> 1:20 P.M. Stranger rode in just now, said his name was Jordyce, a surveyor of some kind. Said he had just come from our roundup camp and that Ruck Farwell said he had to see me at the Indian ruins in Boundary Gulch on a matter of great importance.
>
> Can't imagine what it is, but suspect maybe Ruck has found evidence that Lon Cole has been blotting my brands. I was careful not to tell Ruck to keep a watch out for same, not wanting to prejudice him.
>
> Since Jordyce says he is camping at the Indian ruins, I will ride over there with him. He says Ruck will be down from roundup camp by sundown.
>
> I think I may confide in Ruck that my new will and testament names him as my beneficiary. It is beginning to look as if Lon Cole is willing to marry Luce even if he knows my ranch won't go along with his bride. I had hoped such a drastic step as disinheriting my own flesh and blood would show up Lon Cole in his true colors as a fortune hunter, but it looks as if he is trumping my last ace. My last hope of preventing the marriage is gone. Of course I have not disowned Luce in my heart, but I will never allow Two Slash to fall into Cole's hands.
>
> Leaving for Boundary Gulch 2:30 PM.

Luce's eyes were streaming tears when the lawyer looked up from his reading. "Do you read into that the same thing I do, Mike?" the girl asked. "Dad says that Ruck called the meeting in Boundary Gulch, instead of vice versa."

Venable's heart was pounding his ribs. He avoided Luce's eyes as he said gravely, "Both Lon Cole and Ruck agree that your father sent a written message out to the roundup camp, ordering the meeting at the Indian ruins. In fact, Lon says he delivered the note. This entry in the diary would seem to—"

"Go ahead and say it, Mike," the girl choked out. "Either Lon Cole lied, or my father put a falsehood in his diary. It's driving me crazy, Mike, trying not too lose faith in Lon."

Venable went on, as if to himself, "Another thing. Jordyce is supposed to have delivered Ruck's written note to your father—the note the coroner showed you in town this morning, found on your father's body. But this diary indicates that Jordyce delivered Ruck's message verbally. So a fake note was planted on the body."

LUCE buried her face in her hands, weeping silently.

"Furthermore," Venable said, "this entry in the colonel's diary will be sufficient to discredit Jordyce as a witness in a court of law. The fact that your father rode out to Boundary Gulch with Jordyce would even indicate that Jordyce was present at the time of the murder, as he admits he was. But no judge would rule out the possibility that Jordyce, whom we can prove is a liar, might have been the actual murderer."

Luce looked up. "But why would a stranger like Jordyce want to murder Dad —or pin Dad's murder on Ruck Farwell?"

Venable got to his feet. "I am not a detective, Luce. But I know this. Your father's diary will acquit Farwell of murder."

"Thank God," the girl murmured.

"With your permission, Luce," Venable went on, "I'll retain possession of this book. It will be the means of saving Ruck's life. We will not mention this to anyone until Judge Corbin convenes the trial. You didn't tell Lon about this diary, did you?"

"Of course not. It puts Lon in such a terrible light."

"Good. Very good. This is our secret."

Luce said eagerly, "You'll tell Ruck, won't you? The poor man must already be resigned to the hangrope."

Without warning the lawyer stepped quickly to the door and jerked it open. Standing there, blinking in the sudden blaze of lamplight, stood Lon Cole.

"Eavesdropping, Mr. Cole?" Venable demanded acidly.

Lon Cole colored. "I came over from the bunkhouse to beg you to spare my fiancee any long legal harangue about her father's estate, Mike. Tonight is not the time for it. Luce needs her rest."

Venable thrust the leather-bound diary into the voluminous pocket of his Prince Albert. "I was just leaving your fiancee," the lawyer said to Cole. "I bid you good-night, Luce. I hope you rest well."

They rode out of Two Slash at high noon—Sheriff Tom Blade and his prisoner, Lon

[*Turn page*]

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Cole and Luce Crockett, with Micah Venable bringing up the rear, absorbed in his own thoughts.

Few words were spoken during the long ride down Doublecross Canyon. With Colonel Crockett's funeral scheduled for the following afternoon at the Dos Cruces community church, Lon Cole would be spending the night in town to be close to his fiancee in her hour of sorrow.

An hour before sundown, the riders broke up in front of the Drover's Hotel, where Luce would spend another night in the room she had previously occupied. Venable stayed with Ruck Farwell and the sheriff until they reached the jail.

"With your permission, Sheriff," the lawyer said to Tom Blade, "I'd like another interview with my client—in private. I haven't had a chance to speak to him since we left town."

Blade shrugged indifferently. "You can talk his ear off, if you think it'll help any, Mike. Want me to have Pegleg Pollard bring you your supper in the cell?"

When they entered the jail office, the one-legged deputy handed Farwell a yellow envelope bearing the letterhead of the Overland Telegraph Company. Blade was putting Ruck's guns and knife aside.

"Andy Jorgins fetched over a telegram this afternoon from the depot," Pollard said. "It's for your prisoner."

Blade snatched the flimsy from Farwell's hand. He turned to Venable and said waspishly, "I suppose you'll claim I have no right to censor messages coming to an accused killer, Mike?"

Venable turned to Farwell. "I have no objections if you haven't, Ruck. But I doubt if the sheriff is within his legal rights."

"Go ahead," Farwell said in a dead monotone. "It's probably from an old friend of mine over in Texas, congratulating me for being in the clear with the law."

Blade ripped open the envelope, read the telegram through twice, shrugged, and turned it over to Farwell. As Ruck had guessed, it was from his friend Cookie Burkey, replying to his own telegram of two weeks back:

> Decided if you won't come to argue over old times with me, I'll pay you a visit out there in Arizona. Be arriving in Dos Cruces on El Paso flyer Thursday morning. Hope I can locate ranch you're working for.

Farwell thought gloomily, a fine reunion with old Cookie. He'll be in time to see me stand before a judge and hear my death sentence.

Venable followed Blade and Farwell down the gloomy celler steps and stood by while the sheriff removed the handcuffs and locked the door of the cell.

"I'll go eat supper," Blade said. "The stair door will be locked. Holler for Pegleg when you're through jawboning with Farwell."

Left alone in the dank gloom of the basement cell, Farwell seated himself on the cot and spoke to Venable, who was outside the bars. "Looks like you drew a losing card, electing to defend me, Mike. I haven't the chance of a snowball in hell. It'll be my word against Jordyce's."

Venable turned up the wick of the cell lamp, and from an inner pocket of his coat drew out Colonel Crockett's leather-bound journal.

"Luce found this diary in her father's desk last night, Ruck. It contains evidence which will discredit Jordyce as a reliable witness—and save you from the gallows. On the way down from Two Slash this afternoon I decided it would be cruel not to let you in on what Luce discovered. Listen to this."

LEAVING the jail, Micah Venable walked from the courthouse square and headed down Main Street toward his cottage on the far side of town, at the corner of Manzanita Street.

Passing the Jim-Dandy Saloon, he saw Lon Cole seated at a window table, playing poker with friends, and was glad to know that the Lazy Ladder boss was not imposing his company on Luce up at the hotel.

He entered the deep shadows of the locust-shaded yard fronting his home, mounted the porch steps, and entered the pitch darkness of his living room.

It was his intention to go at once to his bedroom and lock up Colonel Crockett's diary in his private safe. That document was the

key to an innocent man's life; without the weight of the dead man's word which it contained, Venable confessed to himself that he probably could not save Ruck Farwell from a hangman's noose.

He was midway across the room when his nostrils caught the odor of cigar smoke. He whirled, every sense violently shocked, to see the red eye of a cigar butt glow and ebb in the gloom, not an arm's length away.

Before he could break the momentary paralysis which seized his muscles, Micah Venable saw the arc of the cigar as the invisible intruder took it from his lips. A voice that was wholly familiar to the old lawyer came from the darkness, with the lethal quality of a reptile's hiss.

"Farwell's got to hang, Mike. I want that diary of Crockett's."

Panic iced the blood in Venable's veins as he turned and lunged toward the porch door, Crockett's book clutched in his veiny hand.

He heard the heavy pouncing stride of his assailant in pursuit; but he didn't feel the ten-inch steel blade which caught him in the back, plunging hilt-deep between his ribs.

Venable fell headlong into a void as deep and wide as eternity itself, the leather-bound diary striking the floor with a whispery rustle of its pages.

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 45)

1. The bear, with 20 toes. The lion has only 16.
2. Oliver Loving.
3. A rough area where flats or plains break off into cliffs and canyons, as at the Texas Caprock, is called "breaks." "Brakes" are areas covered with small timber, for example "cedar brakes."
4. California.
5. Texas.
6. (1) No strays in it. (2) No cattle infected with tick fever or other disease.
7. No. The cinch goes under the horse's belly from right to left, where it is fastened by a strap called a latigo.
8. No. Naturalists believe one kind of skunk is as likely to have hydrophobia as another, but some old cowboys still think there is a special breed more often so infected.
9. Bring in the saddle horses.
10. Oklahoma City, Okla.

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by Professor MARCUS MARI

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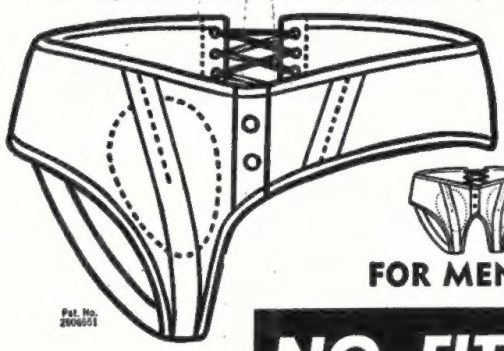

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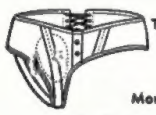

THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PROVED PERFORMANCE . . . RUPTURE-EASER

10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

(Mail Orders Only)

Money back if you don't get blessed relief!

DELAY MAY BE SERIOUS—MAIL COUPON TODAY ⇨

(Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering)

PIPER BRACE CO., Dept. TF-115
811 Wyandotte Kansas City 5, Mo.

PIPER BRACE CO. 811 Wyandotte, Dept. TF-115, Kansas City 5, Mo.

Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side	☐ $3.95	Measure around lowest part of my abdomen is
Left Side	☐ $3.95	
Double	☐ $4.95	.....INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s
Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering

Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $..... ☐ Send C. O. D.

Name.....

Address.....

City and State.....

Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method!

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy new lure. I have no rods or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that everyone else says are fished out and come in with a limit catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, seining, and does not even faintly resemble any of these standard methods of fishing. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life, with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they are public guides, they never divulge their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. No man on your waters has ever *seen it*, ever *heard of it*, or ever *used it*. And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as closed-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish with-in a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the county and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer. My method will be disclosed only to those few men in each area—men who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in big bass from your "fished out" waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method without risking a penny of your money on instructions or lures. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic—until once you try it! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIK R. FARE

Libertyville 9, Illinois

Erik R. Fare, Libertyville 9, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone... State.....